

William Blundell and the ‘horned monster’
of Cheshire: A Catholic gentleman’s
approach to a medical anomaly¹

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William Blundell, a Catholic recusant from Little Crosby in Lancashire who lived from 1620 to 1698, is best known for his staunch commitment to the Catholic faith and his deep royalist convictions.² He was also the author of a broadside concerning a medical anomaly, *A letter vvrit to a friend: Being a description of a horn, which grows in the back part of the head of an ancient vvoman...living at Saughal*, published in 1668. The tract, which is just over 650 words long, spans a single sheet measuring 37cm by 28.5cm. According to the *English short title catalogue* the only copy of the work now extant survives in the Owen H. Wangensteen Historical Library of Biology and Medicine at the University of Minnesota.³ A full transcription and discussion of the broadside is presented here, which provides an insight into the intellectual interests and worldview of a seventeenth-century Catholic gentleman and an

¹ Quotation from George Ormerod, *The history of the county palatine and city of Chester* (3 vols, London, 1819), 2, p. 311. I am grateful to Dr Ian Atherton and Professor Ann Hughes for commenting on a draft of this article.

² Epitomised in the title of an edited collection of his letters, M. Blundell, ed., *Cavalier: Letters of William Blundell to his friends 1620-1698* (London, 1933).

³ William Blundell, *A letter vvrit to a friend: Being a description of a horn, which grows in the back part of the head of an ancient vvoman...living at Saughal* (London, 1668), Wing B3362A. Owen H. Wangensteen Historical Library of Biology and Medicine at the University of Minnesota, TC Bio-Med Wangensteen folio 617.3 B62. The tract has not yet been digitised for the electronic database ‘early English books online’. I am grateful to Elaine Challacombe and James Curley from the Wangensteen Historical Library for permission to publish this document and their support of my work.

interesting account of a rare medical condition of a resident of Saughall in Cheshire.

A
LETTER

VVrit to a Friend:

Being a Description of a Horn, which grows in the Back part of the Head of an ancient Woman, that hath been a VVidow of thirty years standing, and seventy and one years of Age living at *Saughal* about three miles from *Chester*.

Good Cozın,

As I passed through *Wereal* in Cheshire towards *West-Chester* on the eight and twentieth of the last month I found at a Village called great *Saughal*, about three miles northwards from *Chester*, a Widow of thirty years standing, and seventy one years of Age (as she told me); who shewed me fast growing upon the back part of her head, a perfect hard Horn, not unlike in collour to the horn of a Sheep. I measured the length of the same following, the outward part, according as the Horn bended, and I found it from the Root to one end of the Tip ends (for it ends in a wide fork, each side of which is about t[w]o inches long) to be half a foot in length, bating out half an inch. The Circumference of the said Horn (which carries for the most part almost an equal thickness, from the Root to the opening of the fork.) I measured it to be two inches and five eight parts. This Horn is crooked, and, I think, it shortens itself by the bending a full third part, if you measure the shortest way from the root to the next tip end. It groweth partly sidewaies, and not much, or downward from the root, and it lyeth almost close to the head. The grany or striatura of this horn passeth straight along from end to end, I think, like the horn of a Dear, and not like to that of a Sheeps horn, which passeth round about. I was told, that there do appear within it by the help of the Suns light, sundry little fibre or threads which may seem to give it nourishment. The Woman who weareth this horn, is called *Mary Davies*, she appears to be an humble good Soul, and is so reputed by her Neighbours, so that by what I saw and heard there cannot be left doubt of any Artifice in the matter, she seems to be unwilling to shew it, and had then so much concealed it, that few of the Neighbourhood

knew it. By extreimity of pain and the late extraordinary growth of the monstrous excrescence have forced her of late to discover it in some measure, and now the thing will be publick. She told me, that a Wen or some such like matter did many years ago appear first in the same place, which grew into a horn about two inches long, and as thick as this, which I saw; but that horn falling off, about nine years since, another grew in the place longer then the first, but not so long as this; That she cast that second Horn about four years ago, from the root of which hath sprung the horn, which I now have seen. She told me (as I remember) that she had given one or both of the cast horns abovesaid to the Minister of the Place.⁴ *Sir*, I desire you will communicate this to some of those worthy Spirits, who do make an useful search into the wonders of Nature; for however they may suspend their belief for a time, the truth will soon be unquestioned, till when I do engage my credit to you for what I have here written, and will ever remain.

Your Affectionate Kinsman and Servant.

Cresby 1668.

William Blundel.

POST-SCRIPT.

This Widow is the mother of sundry Children yet living, and of many dead, and it is said by some, that one of her living Sons hath some such like excrescence growing on his Head.

LONDON, Printed by B. G. 1668.⁵

⁴ Another contemporary account of Mary Davies's horns records that she gave two sets of horns to 'Mr. Hewson minister of Shotwick [in which parish Great and Little Saughall fell]'. This is almost certainly a reference to William Hewetson, minister of Shotwick from 1648 to 1661. Anon, *A brief narrative of a strange and wonderful old woman that hath a pair of horns growing on her head* (London, 1676), p. 6; R. Richards, *Old Cheshire churches: A survey of their history, fabric and furniture with records of older monuments* (London, 1947), pp. 302-03.

⁵ The *English short title catalogue* gives the full name for the publisher as B. Griffin. There is no indication of any connection between Griffin and Blundell beyond this tract.

Blundell's account of Mary Davies's horn may initially appear fantastic. By the early modern period there was 'a pre-existing tradition of "horns" as divine attributions' and they could both denote demonic connections and indicate divine status.⁶ Horns were also believed to have medicinal qualities; as one contemporary recorded, '...I have long time found that all kind of horne are a cordiall & healing restorative'.⁷ Due to the income that could be derived from all varieties of horn, fraudulent efforts to profit from their 'discovery' were rife. In 1659, Richard Jones, Earl of Ranelagh, recorded a method artificially to force the growth of horns, in which a cock has its comb and spurs cut off, after which the author instructs the reader to 'put one or both on his head, screwing them a little into the rest of the combe...and they will grow forth like horns and have a pretty large size'.⁸ The human horn was the most elusive and its provenance was the subject of suspicion. However, while separating reality from myth can be difficult, such anomalies have occurred in the past and present.

Human horns, known to the medical profession as *cornu cutaneum* or cutaneous horns, are compacted keratin that forms in the shape of a horn. They are 'exceedingly rare in humans' and can develop in a variety of locations on the body and grow to lengths of more than 25cm.⁹ Although cutaneous horns appear similar aesthetically to animal horns, yellow with furrows running along

⁶ R.S. Tubbs, M.D. Smyth, J.C. Wellons, J.P. Blount and W.J. Oakes, 'Human horns: A historical review and clinical correlation', *Neurosurgery*, 52 (2003), p. 1444; G.A. Russell, 'The "horns" of a medical dilemma: Alexander the Great', *Journal of the history of the neurosciences*, 13 (2004), pp. 159-65.

⁷ Hartlib papers electronic database, Royal society MSS, Boyle letters 7.8 1A-3B, extract in scribal hand, John Beale to unnamed recipient, 9 April 1658; K. Knight, 'A precious medicine: Tradition and magic in some seventeenth-century household remedies', *Folklore*, 113 (2002), pp. 237-47.

⁸ Hartlib papers electronic database, James Marshall and Marie-Louise Osborn collection Beinecke rare book and manuscript library, Yale University, document 40, letter, Richard Jones, Earl of Ranelagh, to Samuel Hartlib, 18 November 1659.

⁹ M. Michal, M. Bisceglia, A. Di Mattia, L. Requena, J.C. Fanburg-Smith, P. Mukensnabl, O. Hes and F. Cada, 'Gigantic cutaneous horns of the scalp: Lesions with a gross similarity to the horns of animals: A report of four cases', *American journal of surgical pathology*, 26 (2002), p. 789.

their length, there is a significant histological difference, in that animal horns contain a centrally positioned bone, which does not appear in cutaneous horns.¹⁰ That they are found less frequently and rarely grow to the lengths of the human horns described in early modern literature is a reflection of increased awareness and treatment before a horn can grow, and the fact that if they do reach 'horn' stage these growths are usually surgically removed early on.¹¹

Blundell's account of Davies's horns was corroborated in a 1670 anonymous pamphlet entitled *A brief narrative of a strange and wonderful old woman that hath a pair of horns growing upon her head* and again in Charles Leigh's observations on the natural history of Lancashire and Cheshire printed in 1700.¹² Although it is possible that these two accounts were based on Blundell's broadsheet, the *Brief narrative* was written after Davies travelled to London, gave precise details of her location in the city suggesting that others went to view her, and stated that the anonymous author had seen Davies her or himself. They also provide some additional material which help place Davies in her local context, noting that prior to her departure for London she leased a farm from the crown at a cost of £16 per annum and served her neighbours as a 'professed mid-wife'.¹³ A second edition of the *Brief narrative* was published in 1676, indicating the interest that the account generated.¹⁴ While

¹⁰ E. Copcu, N. Sivrioglu and N. Culhaci, 'Cutaneous horns: Are these lesions as innocent as they seem to be?', *World journal of surgical oncology*, 2:18 (2004) [<http://www.wjso.com/content/2/1/18>, accessed 10 February 2008].

¹¹ Tubbs *et al*, 'Human horns', p. 1446.

¹² Anon, *A brief narrative of a strange and wonderful old woman that hath a pair of horns growing upon her head* (London, 1670) [note that the page references to *A brief narrative* given throughout this article refer to the 1676 version]; Charles Leigh, *The natural history of Lancashire, Cheshire, and the Peak, in Derbyshire, with an account of the British, Phoenician, Armenian, Greek and Roman antiquities in those parts* (3 parts in 1 vol., London, 1700), part 1, table vii; part 2, pp. 3-4.

¹³ Anon, *Brief narrative*, pp. 4-5.

¹⁴ Anon, *A brief narrative of a strange and wonderful old woman that hath a pair of horns growing upon her head* (London, 1676). Indeed, it is clear that Davies remained the subject of some interest for many years to come. Elias Ashmole, the antiquary and collector who had a deep interest in the natural world, both acquired one of the horns Davies shed and purchased her portrait,

there is a significant overlap in the information provided in all the accounts, the style of writing and approach adopted in Blundell's broadside is notably different from many contemporary reports.

Extant early modern accounts of cutaneous horns overwhelmingly offered the reader an explanation for their growth. The earliest case of a cutaneous horn to be described in full, that of Margaret Gryffifth in 1588, was thought to have been caused by 'that in her youth, her husband had suspected her of "some light behaviour" and chided her severely. She had denied with as much vehemence and rejoined that if she had given her husband the horn, she wished that a horn would grow from her own forehead'.¹⁵ David Turner uses this as an example of 'the sexual double standard' that saw horns grow on the heads of women to indicate their own infidelity.¹⁶ In 1646, a 70-year-old Dutch woman with a long cutaneous horn speculated that it was divine judgement for her arguments with her son.¹⁷ Leigh's explanation was not based on divine forces, but instead the power of maternal imagination. Recording details of a picture of a horned woman he

while his notes record that she was the subject of a paper presented to the philosophical society in Oxford in February 1685. C.H. Josten, ed., *Elias Ashmole 1617-1692* (5 vols, Oxford, 1966), 4, p. 1756; *A catalogue of the Ashmolean Museum* (Oxford, 1836), p. 67. Davies was one of the case studies in Edward Home's 1791 seminal paper on cutaneous horns: J. Bondeson, 'Everard Home, John Hunter, and cutaneous horns', *American journal of dermatopathology*, 23 (2001), p. 366. In the British Library's edition of Leigh, *Natural history*, a manuscript letter is mounted on a guard at the front of the document written by Owen Brereton, heir to the estate on which Mary Davies lived in Cheshire before she moved to London. He noted that 'I heard Mr Homes Paper read last night on Human & animal excrescences like Horns, wherin he mentions the name of Mary Davis' and proceeds to give a summary of the paper: British Library, 459.c.1, letter mounted on guard in Leigh, *Natural history*. Though one of her horns was allegedly presented to the king of France, and another was recorded as being lodged in the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford, the last mention is in the Ashmolean's 1836 catalogue and Davies's horns have since disappeared. A. MacGregor, 'Mary Davis's horn: A vanished curiosity', *The Ashmolean*, 3 (1983), pp. 10-11.

¹⁵ Bondeson, 'Everard Home', p. 362.

¹⁶ David M. Turner, *Fashioning adultery: Gender, sex and civility in England, 1660-1740* (Cambridge, 2002), pp. 86-87.

¹⁷ Bondeson, 'Everard Home', p. 364.

once observed at Whalley Abbey in Lancashire, Leigh speculated that 'whence came this *Lusus Naturae*, or Praeternatural accident, is, I think, a *Phoenomenon* not to be accounted for, unless at the time of Coition some such Monstrous Idea might then be imprinted on the *Foetus*'.¹⁸ Leigh noted the example of a child born with the figures of leaves, boughs and cherries in the palm of its hand, which he surmised was the result of the mother dreaming 'she was with Child of a Cherry-Tree, which made such a wonderful Impression on the Foetus' but claimed he would not give further examples, as to do so 'wou'd too much swell this Chapter to recite them'.¹⁹ Margrit Shildrick argues that this reasoning behind monstrous births does not highlight the power of the female body but its 'inherent weakness', and reflects the female's inability to separate appearance from reality.²⁰ However, increasingly authors were offering more secular perspectives for such occurrences, such as that found in the *Brief narrative* concerning Mary Davies's horn, which the author claimed was 'occasioned by wearing a straight Hat'.²¹ The absence of any speculation as to the cause of Davies's horn in Blundell's broadside makes his account particularly striking and is a pattern found in his other writing on abnormalities in the natural order.

Entries in Blundell's commonplace books spanned a wide range of interests relating to irregularities in the natural order. These entries are found in notes on the country in which the abnormality originated, or in some cases were grouped together under titles indicating the particular deviation being discussed.²² Blundell recorded James Howell's claim that the women of north Holland excrete a form of afterbirth which 'is a thing lyke a Batt...The midwife throws it into the fyre, and holds a sheet before

¹⁸ Leigh, *Natural history*, part 2, p. 3.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

²⁰ M. Shildrick, 'Maternal imagination: Reconceiving first impressions', *Rethinking history*, 4 (2000), p. 249.

²¹ Anon, *Brief narrative*, p. 6.

²² For instance, Blundell discussed the heights of peculiarly tall people under the heading 'statura hominum', Lancashire County Record Office, DDBI acc. 6121, box 4, [Historica], ff. 45, 73b, 125b.

it, least it should fly away'.²³ He noted the account of a 42-year-old woman who gave birth to 365 children in one sitting, 'the odd one whereof was a Hermophradite, the rest both sexes equally divided', all of which died after being baptised.²⁴ He also had a particular interest in recording abnormally tall people. He personally took 'the Measure of Mrs Jane Mere a Lancashyre mayd AD 1664 she was 2 yards 3 inches high in low shoes' and while in London in the same year he paid 6d to meet one John Dodes and that 'All I could do standing flat on my heels was to reach with the point of my long finger to the very top or middle part of his head'.²⁵ These observations were supplemented with notes from books he read, such as 'Stowes Abridgm[en]t speakes of a Dutch man at London in 1581 whose stature was 7 foote 7 inches'.²⁶

In both his commonplace entries and in his broadsheet, Blundell made no attempt to identify possible causes for such deformities, whether the growth of a horn or the birth of 365 babies who died after being baptised. Instead, he meticulously recorded details about the respective anomalies without speculating on their cause. Only on two occasions did his commonplace entries deviate from this approach, when Blundell provided a brief entry taken from Kenelm Digby's *Powder of sympathy* detailing 'strange storyes' of the power of maternal imagination, and a quotation from Ephraim Pagitt's *Heresiography* that Anne Hutchinson 'a troublesome Antinomian Sectary in New England' was delivered of 30 monstrous births at one sitting 'much about the number of her monstrous opinions'.²⁷ However,

²³ *Historica*, f. 36b; James Howell, *Epistolae ho-elianae familiar letters domestic and forren* (2 vols, London, 1650), 2, p. 15.

²⁴ *Historica*, f. 30; Howell, *Epistolae ho-elianae*, 2, p. 14.

²⁵ *Historica*, ff. 45, 73b.

²⁶ *Historica*, f. 125b; John Stow, *The abridgement of the English chronicle* (London, 1618), p. 337.

²⁷ *Historica*, ff. 34b, 46, 60b; Kenelm Digby, *A late discourse made in a solemn assembly of nobles and learned men at Montpellier in France...touching the cure of wounds by the powder of sympathy...rendered faithfully out of French into English* (London, 1664), pp. 104, 109; Ephraim Pagitt, *Heresiography, or, a description and history of the hereticks and sectaries sprang up in these latter times* (London, 1662), p. 133. For a discussion of Anne Hutchinson's monstrous births and the way Puritans manipulated maternal rhetoric against her, see L. Buchanan, 'A study of

with both entries Blundell referenced their content with no indication that he agreed with their arguments. The approach found in Blundell's observations echoes broader contemporary trends in the recording of abnormalities in the natural order.

Throughout the early modern period there was a fascination with individuals with severe disabilities or deformities. So-called monster literature, which detailed the distinguishing features of such individuals, was widely popular and the efforts of entrepreneurial publishers meant that its content was accessible to all levels of society. Such accounts were incorporated into contemporary approaches to philosophy, while ballads and woodcuts ensured that even the illiterate could access them.²⁸ Katherine Park and Lorraine Daston have shown that during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries monster literature evolved in the light of philosophic and scientific advances. While their arguments have been criticised for suggesting that this shift was a rapid, linear transition, during the early modern period contemporaries increasingly rejected providential interpretations of monsters, instead highlighting the intrinsic wonder of the monstrous elements discussed and offering natural causes in place of supernatural.²⁹ Francis Bacon provided an important step in this 'gradual process of naturalization'.³⁰ In his *Novum organum* Bacon praised the study of such monsters, arguing that 'he who has learnt...[nature's] deviations, will be able more accurately to

maternal rhetoric: Anne Hutchinson, monsters, and the antinomian controversy', *Rhetoric review*, 25 (2006), pp. 239-59.

²⁸ K. Park and L. Daston, 'Unnatural conceptions: The study of monsters in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century France and England', *Past & Present*, 92 (1981), p. 22; Paul Semonin, 'Monsters in the marketplace: The exhibition of human oddities in early modern England', in Rosemarie Garland Thomson, ed., *Freakery: Cultural spectacles of the extraordinary body* (New York, 1996), pp. 69-81.

²⁹ Park and Daston, 'Unnatural conceptions', pp. 23, 26; Lorraine Daston and Katharine Park, *Wonders and the order of nature 1150-1750* (New York, 1998); K.M. Brammall, 'Monstrous metamorphosis: Nature, morality, and the rhetoric of monstrosity in Tudor England', *Sixteenth century journal*, 27 (1996), p. 5. For criticisms of Park and Daston, see Semonin, 'Monsters in the marketplace', pp. 71-75.

³⁰ Park and Daston, 'Unnatural conceptions', pp. 35-41, 43.

describe her [normal] paths'.³¹ Bacon's approach to monstrous births and anomalies in nature encouraged observers to avoid projecting 'idols' of the mind onto their observations of the world and held that a successful observation relied on ensuring that '...all superstitious stories...and experiments of ceremonial magic should be altogether rejected'.³²

Blundell's commonplace entries indicate a staunch commitment to the work of Francis Bacon; he frequently noted that 'Bacon renewed in England the love of Philosophy' and collated references from learned individuals who had praised Bacon, which included notes from James Howell and the Catholic convert Toby Matthews.³³ Although Blundell never explicitly stated that he was following the approach advocated by Bacon, his frequent use of Bacon's work as an authority on these matters and the particular style of Blundell's notes on abnormalities in the natural order leave little doubt that Bacon's writing had informed his approach. That this was the case not only provides an insight into Blundell's interests, but reminds us that he, and other early modern Catholics, can rarely be defined entirely by their religious convictions and often paid as much heed to the cultural trends of their time as did their Protestant counterparts.

³¹ Cited in P.K. Wilson, 'Eighteenth-century "monsters" and nineteenth-century "freaks": Reading the maternally marked child', *Literature and medicine*, 21 (2002), p. 6. See also Semonin, 'Monsters in the marketplace', p. 71.

³² Cited in J. Martin, *Francis Bacon, the state, and the reform of natural philosophy* (Cambridge, 1992), p. 153. See also Brammall, 'Monstrous metamorphosis', p. 5; Park and Daston, 'Unnatural conceptions', pp. 45, 48; Martin, *Francis Bacon*, p. 151.

³³ *Historica*, f. 38b; Lancashire County Record Office, DDBI acc. 6121, box 4, *Adversaria*, f. 336b; Tobie Matthew, *A collection of letters, made by Sr Tobie Mathews kt.* (London, 1659), preface; Howell, *Epistolae ho-elianae*, 2, pp. 107-08.