The Zurich Hermaphrodite

In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, Siamese twins, hermaphrodites, and other unusual births attracted much attention, and were depicted and discussed in various media, including medical tracts, popular songs and broadsheets. One of the earliest examples of the latter (perhaps the earliest) is that depicting the so-called Zurich Hermaphrodite.


Translation: Christof Rolker.

Billich verwundert sich Jung und alt
Ab [sic] dissem kind und seltzamer gestalt
Liplich geborn do man zelt für war
Tussend fünfhundert und nünzacht Jar
Im Jenner uff dem ersten tag
So yeder man der fröiden pflag
Ein niües Jar frölich zepfan
Rücht diss kind an die welt zů kan
Sölích sů Zürich ist beschehen
Piderb lüt hand es gesehen
Redent für war on allen zorn
Ob siner weiche sy es geborn
Subtil mit glidmas hüpsch und gantz¹
Nithalb hab es ein manen schwantz
Einer frowen scham stůnd nach daby
Ein knollen rotfleisch och da sy
Sölích figur ist geborn zwar
An dem hürigen nüwen jar
Nach kriechischer sprach ist der nam sin
Androgines und och In latin
Wort es genant hermaphrodit
Dar von dan Ovidus schript ¶Ovid, 4 Met.
Das sölich veneris und Mercurii kind
Durch die wasser göttererzogen sind
Durch das man eigentlich mag verstan
Gros unkünscheit syg under uns kan
Mit zů trincken, füllen und zů triben
Es syg von töchtern ald e wibren
Kupplien ars welben und dero ley
Das ist allenthalb yetz das gschrey
Wir füren nun ein seltzen orden
es sind allein fier houpf sündig worden
Dann unkünscheit und füllerey
Und och grosse hoffart darby
Die strafft nieman für kein tod sündig mer
Es syg ritter, knecht oder herr
Das hand unser sordren nie gethan
Sunder uff frumkeit und eer fil ghan
Aber yetz strept niemans nach manheit
Allein uff füllen und unluterkeit
Eim bider man stellen uff sin wib und kind
Sölích yetz manlich taten sind
Das zeigt diů figur hie klar und gantz
Der frowen scham stat ober dem schwantz

Young and old, all wonder, and rightly so,
about this child and strange figure
born in the flesh in the year
one-thousand fifehundred and nineteen,
on the first of January
when everyone is merry
to welcome the New Year in jolly mood
then this child was born.
This occurred in Zurich
honest people have witnesssed it
talking about it, without anger,
that because of feebleness it was born
with members, fine and whole,
but below it has a man’s rod,
as a piece of red flesh.
While this figure is born
only this New Year
it already has a name; in Greek:
Androgyunes, and also in Latin,
called a Hermaphrodite.
Ovid (Metamorphoses, book four¹) writes
that the child of Venus and Mercury
was raised by the gods of water.³
From this one might understand
that there is gross debauchery among us,
including drinking, over-eating, whoring
with young girls and married women,
pimping, showing off the arse, and the like
This is talked about (?) everywhere these days
We have become a strange order
four capital sins rule,
as debauchery and gluttony
and great haughtiness
these are not punished as capital sins anymore
by no-one, knight, vassel or lord.
Our fathers never had done so;
rather, they held piety and honour in high es-
teem.
These days, however, no-one seek manliness,
But only gluttony and dishonesty.
To seek after an honest man’s wife and daughter
– such are the ‘manly’ deeds in our days.
This indeed clearly shows this figure:
the female privy parts are above the rod.

¹ Note the akrostic in lines 1–13.
³ I.e. the Naiad nymphs (see Ovid).
Dazu das die groß unkünscheit
Hatt nidertruckt alle manheit
Und all sig hafft lüt überwunden
Söllich in macrobio wirt funden ¶ Macro.,
(l. 3 satur.4
Hannibal ward hie durch verfürt
Und all sin volck mit im zerstört
In campania gantz nider gleit ¶ Val. Max.,
(l. 95
Alls das Vallerius von im seyt
Durch wibsche unkünscheit das bschach
By Olyfernes man das ouch sach6
Verlor den strit von unkünscheit wegen
Das mag man von uns ouch wol segen
Das unser manheit ist yetz gleit
Uff brassen schlemen und unkünscheit
Da durch wir halb wiber worden sind
Die ir wessen vermischet6 tribent
Alls Plinius von inen tůdt schriben ¶Pli., li. 7
Androgyne ist der selben nam
Ich förcht es wery nütz gůtz drus kan
Gott der natur das hat anzeigt ¶ Augus. De
(do. chri.8
Im wider wertig sy die unkünscheit
Dan Sodomot und Gomora die two stett
Das helsch für vom vom himel verbret hett
Von ir wüsten unluterkeit wegen
Darum wirt uns gott das nit vertreben
Das man uns diss figur bedüten
Als einist by der Römeren zitenn
Gschah durch ein kind sechs manott alt
Dz verkünt die zerstörung des römischen gwalt
Als uns Titus Livius schript ¶ Li., li. 21 bell.
(pu. li. i99

This is because the great debauchery has oppressed all manliness and won a complete victory over it. The like one finds in Macrobius (Saturnalia, book three):3

Hannibal was thus seduces and with him, all his people destroyed and overcome in Campania (Valerius Maximus, book nine5);

55 all this Valerius reports of him. Female debauchery was the cause of all this. Holofernes is yet another example;5 he lost the war because of debauchery. The same may well be saif about ourselves,

60 that our manliness these days is directed towards splorging, gluttony and debauchery. By this, we have become half like women, who have their lewd ways in confusion,7 as Pliny (book seven8) writes about them;

65 they are called androgyne.

I fear, nothing good will spring from this God has shown nature that debauchery is an abomination to him (Augustine, On Christi-an doctrine9),

70 as Sodom and Gomorrah, the two cities, were burnt by fire from heaven, because of their gross uncleansiness. Therefore, God will not pardon us – this is, what this figure means, just as once, in the times of the Romans, it occurred that a baby, six month old, foretold the destruction of the Roman Empire, as Livy relates us (Livy, book 21, Bellum Pun-icum, first book10).

4 Reference not identified. Macrobius, Saturnalia iii does not mention Hannibal, and Saturnalia ii, 3 (Loeb Classical Library 510, 328) on Hannibal does not fit the above reference.

5 Reference not identified. Valerius Maximus in his Factorum ac dictorum memorabilium libri IX. (ed. K. Kempf, Berlin 1854) depicts Hannibal in an extremely negative way (stressing his cruelty and arrogance), but does not specifically link his fall to being seduced by a woman.

6 Holofernes, seduced and beheaded by Judith according to the Book of Judith, was a common theme in medieval and early modern literature and art (e.g. Chaucer, Dante, Lucas Cranach, Caravaggio).

7 ‘Confusion’ (Latin confusio) in medieval usage referred to the confusion of the sexes (i.e. intersexuality), but could also imply sexual sins. In the King James Version, the Biblical scelus (for incest and bestiality) is rendered ‘confusion’, e.g. in Lev. 18, 23 [KJV]: ‘neither shall any woman stand before a beast to lie down thereto: it is confusion’.8

8 See Pliny, Naturalis historia VII, iii, 35–iv, 37 (Loeb Classical Library 352, 528–531).

9 Augustine, De doctrina christiana (CSEL 80) famously deals with signs, including God’s revelation in nature. De doctrina iii, 36 briefly mentions the destruction of Sodom.

10 Livy, Ab urbe condita libri xxi, 62, 2 (Loeb Classical Library 233, 184). Book xxi is the first book of the so-called Third Decade, i.e. the books on the Second Punic War (218 to 201 BC).
As no misdeed remains unpunished,
I have to report one more thing:
people saw in heaven,
this New Year's day
something (?) you should not ignore.
For Lucius Junius, it was his doom (Val., book 1)
 to have ignored miraculous signs;
soon after, all his good perished,
and he himself was drowned.
Thus, if you want to prevent harm and grief
flee the sin of debauchery!
Insist on virtue and manliness –
this will bring good luck and salvation
both in this world and in eternity;
this God may grant us all,
Amen. Printed in Zurich.

Reference not identified.