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Life Was Like That:

The Grotesque Medieval in the Modern Imagination

Modern imaginings of the medieval are full of the disabled. Lend an eye to any work of historical fiction set in the Middle Ages, or a film that makes claim to represent a medieval past event, and the disabled human body is represented, often in a variety of forms, and sometimes set right at the forefront of the narrative. One of the most prevalent examples at the present moment is the character of Tyrion Lannister in George R.R. Martin's *A Song of Ice and Fire* or *Game of Thrones* series. Tyrion is "a dwarf" with a "head too large for his body, with a brute's squashed-in face beneath a swollen shelf of brow" who struggles against the prejudices of his own family, not to mention the larger population of the world he lives within.¹ Ragnar Lothbrok's fifth son, Ivar, from the Ragnars saga *Loðbrókar* (or more recently, from the History Channel show, *The Vikings*) is another. Ivar, of course, is better known in history as Ivar the Boneless, either because he was impaired by a congenital condition that some suspect might have been osteogenesis imperfecta) or due to a misreading or mistranscription of the by-name "exosus," (Latin: the detested) as "ex ossus," or without bone.² Both Tyrion and Ivar are characters who could be, and sometimes have been, described as grotesque (among other starkly negative words) both in and outside of the text. For example, Tyrion, in defense of the paralyzed Bran Stark, calls himself one of the grotesques, claiming that identity for himself as almost a matter of pride, recognizing his status as both disabled and extraordinary in a world that privileges the normal. In many modern representations of medieval, in fact, the two concepts, disability and the grotesque, are frequently conflated into one, the disabled body representing the disruption of order that the grotesque thrives upon. But in doing so, in the way that modern texts recall the Bakhtinian concept of the medieval grotesque, they miss a key point--the grotesque is not a negation of humanity but a celebration of one.

Grotesque, the grotesque as Bakhtin identifies it, the feeling that sustains the medieval carnivalesque, involves "a special concept of the body as a whole and of the limits of this whole. The boundaries between the body and the world and between separate bodies are drawn in the grotesque genre quite differently."³ The grotesque body is one perpetually caught "in the act of becoming. It is never finished, never completed; it is continually built, creates, and builds and creates another body. Moreover, the body swallows the world and is itself swallowed by the world."⁴ What is the grotesque body in the Middle Ages, or more specifically, in the literature of

¹ Martin, *GOT*.

² See Robert Ferguson's *The Vikings: A History*, or Martin Biddle and Birthe Kjolbye-Biddle's "Repton and the 'great heathen army,' 873-4" in *Vikings and the Danelaw* (2016), p. 83.

³ Bakhtin, *Rabelais*, 315.

⁴ Bakhtin, *Rabelais*, 317.

the Middle Ages? It is a body caught between stages of being. It is the Giant of Mont-St-Michel, the "foulsomest freke / that formed was eve!," who literally marks the narrative transition between Arthur as English king and Arthur as Continental Conqueror.⁵ It is the "pot-bellied, humpbacked, and crabbed dwarf" who leads Sir Lancelot astray in *The Knight of the Cart*, leading the royal knights left behind to fear that Arthur's most perfect knight has been led to his death, and begin to search for him without knowing where to even look.⁶ It is the creatures that haunt the edges of the known world on the famous medieval maps. It is Grendel and his mother, the werewolf of Bisclavret. There are any number of characters or figures within medieval narratives that exceed, in some way or another, the bodily expectations of the medieval norm; characters, who work in the liminal spaces within the text, marking a transition or diversion. Who consume without thought or care--as the giant who has "freten of folk," the dwarf who is not just small but "pot-bellied," the great beast who devours the thanes of the meadhall.⁷ What these characters represent is humanity at its most base, its most earthly. At the point furthest from the Divine, and therefore, the most human.

The point is made over and over again, individuals such as Tyrion or Ivar are not fully human. They are referred to as monsters, deformed, different, unwanted, undesirable. Both would have been exposed to the elements or murdered, had not their social status or a mother's love kept them alive despite the belief of those in the community, in their families, that they should be left to die. But "Debasement is the fundamental artistic principle of grotesque realism; all that is sacred and exalted is rethought on the level of the material bodily stratum or else combined and mixed with its images," suggests Bakhtin.⁸ In other words, the disordered body is just as human--just as whole--as the "sacred and exalted." It may be different, but it is no more and no less than human, that nature that we all share in. In these representations of Ivar and Tyrion, then (no matter that the History Channel would like to have us believe otherwise) we witness not a representation of the Middle Ages transported through time for our own entertainment and edification, but the imposition of several generations worth of myth upon an Othered past. The modern myth of the brutal historical past. "The 'classic' portrait of the later Middle Ages as especially 'barbaric' and full of violence (judicial and otherwise)," writes Irina Metzler in *A Social History of Disability in the Middle Ages*, isn't derived from fact but from bad--or, at least, early--scholarship.⁹ The conclusion of a brutal Middle Ages is spurious at best in contrast to modern sociological and anthropological findings. Still, modern representations of medieval disability follow that pattern of thought, which has become a beloved and multifaceted myth perpetuated over the generations as "just the way things were back then." This misdirection

⁵ *AMA*, ll.1061.

⁶ De Troyes, *Lancelot or, The Knight of the Cart*, Vv. 5007-5198.

⁷ *AMA*, ll. 845;

⁸ Bakhtin, *Rabelais*, 370.

⁹ Metzler, 2015, 14.

includes old standards such as "medieval people didn't bathe, they couldn't read or write," and, as it pertains to us today, "the disabled or impaired Othered were a burden upon society, were signs of humanity's sinfulness, or were unvalued and disposable." In fact, they were not disposable, they were not symbolically marked as signs of humanity falling away from God. Instead, the disabled were an essential part of the social structure, participating and contributing to the local society.¹⁰

And in connection, the modern usage of the word 'grotesque,' (specifically, the grotesque as Bakhtin employed it) has taken on a negative meaning, as evidenced in the way modern popular culture or representations of medievalism apply it. Or, rather, a primarily negative meaning. The 'grotesque' "discloses the potentiality of an entirely different world, of another order, another way of life."¹¹ Certainly it has retained its connection to the body, to bodily excess or absence, to the body as fractured or un-whole or disorganized. But it has lost its sense of cathartic reincarnation, the joy that is celebrated when that which has been diminished begins to rise again. Where, in the Bakhtinian carnival these differences--bodily, mentally, emotionally, etc.--were celebrated as symbolic of life's continual cycle of becoming--life, death, and rebirth--the modern medievalized representations interpret these differences as a threat to human nature and to the cohesiveness of the human body at-large. With no hope of renewal; only fear.

"We will not understand the spirit of grotesque," Bakhtin writes, "if we do not take into account the deeply positive element, the victorious triumph inherent in every banquet image of folklore origin. The awareness of a purely human material bodily power," one that creates even as it destroys.¹² Tyrion's short stature becomes symbolic of his father's fear of emasculation, a symbol of his own shortcomings, to the point that Tywin Lannister has convinced himself that he could not have fathered the child. Ivar's misshapen and unusable legs are, in his father Ragnar's mind, the result of his own failings, his impatience, his questioning of the gods, perhaps even the first sign of his impending and inevitable death. But in terms of the Bakhtinian grotesque, these bodily differences represent something else entirely, "the world turned inside out," the "topsy-turvy" carnival where the social hierarchy is reversed, where the fool wears the crown and the king the beggar's rags. Tyrion and Ivar spend plenty of time on the margins of the social system, but in thinking about the two, it is important to remember that these bodies, these individuals, have always been a part of the world, of society, to begin with. The rise and fall of the fool, the cripple, the child--those not ordinarily in any position of power--these are part of the social cycle. Perhaps best of all, better than the whole-bodied brothers their fathers prefer, Tyrion and Ivar represent the grotesque cycle, the carnivalesque, in the way their father's

¹⁰ See Metzler: *Disability in Medieval Europe* (2006), *A Social History of Disability in the Middle Ages* (2013), and *Fools and Idiots? Cognitive Disability in the Middle Ages* (2016).

¹¹ Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, 48.

¹² Bakhtin, *Rabelais*, 296

bodies and authority are seen to be reduced, diminished, in having brought these individuals into being. And then, as the grotesque being consumes the world, consumes itself, the sons overtake the father, rise above him. Tyrion ascends to the same position Tywin has held, first in his father's absentia, but later in his own right, as he joins the invading force of the last Targaryen army. Ivar, in the narratives received from the sagas, becomes one of the greatest leaders in Viking history, legs or no legs, and leads the army of his late father into England, to avenge Ragnar's death.

Modern representations of the medieval, however, seem to misunderstand the celebratory part of the grotesque, of the carnival. Something has been lost in the translation from the medieval to the modern, from the sense of the risible or risqué taboo of the Carnival to the unsympathetic disgust that runs through reactions to characters like Tyrion and Ivar within their texts and representations. Perhaps Bakhtin explains our modern failings in representing the grotesque best:

In the sphere of imaginary cosmic fear (as any other fear) is defeated by laughter. Therefore dung and urine, as comic matter that can be interpreted bodily, play an important part in these images. They appear in hyperbolic quantities and cosmic dimensions. Cosmic catastrophe represented in the material bodily lower stratum is degraded, humanized, and transformed into grotesque monsters. Terror is conquered by laughter.¹³

In the end, the grotesque works to ultimately destroy the Other as a concept to incite fear. It enacts the topsy-turvy, the turning of the unknown onto its head, and "cannot be understood without appreciating the defeat of fear" that it enacts.¹⁴

So, what then is our job? How do we address the misconceptions, rehabilitate the image of disability in the Middle Ages and re-assimilate the subversive quality of the grotesque into modern representations of the period as a whole, and specific individual instances or interjections of it? The root of all our work in the past, in history and its leavings, is to apply and explain it to the present, to demonstrate our connections to it, how we have emerged--though not necessarily evolved--from it. And because the product of history is the present, because ultimately our work is directed toward the present, translating the past into the now, all -isms, all modern concepts must be relevant. And therefore the recovering, the reconstructing, and the reassimilation of disability is a double-edged sword. One that must work in the before and the after, because as we reeducate those who will listen on the history of medieval disability we simultaneously require reevaluation of its modern history as well. Much of the contemporary folklore regarding its own treatment of those considered disabled or impaired takes on a notion

¹³ Bakhtin, *Rabelais*, 336.

¹⁴ Bakhtin, *Rabelais*, 91.

of superiority, an "At least you weren't born back then" attitude that justifies modern approaches to the legislating, acculturating, or treating the disabled while demonizing and condemning previous historical approaches. To rewrite the history of medieval disability is to demand a rejection of that narrative that says those who were not able-bodied, mentally competent, or otherwise, were rejected from the medieval community and instead acknowledge the ways in which they were assimilated, or accommodated. And sometimes to an extent that would put our modern disability infrastructure (where it exists) to shame.