



A Medieval Chancery Case of Mental Health and a Monster

Wendy J. Turner

Abstract

Chancery records of medieval England record an interaction between two men, one disguised as a monster. The first man, William, asks the second to disclose his real identity and when he only growls, William kills him. The details of this case are recorded in the letters patent, which were sent out to the public to address particular legal and royal matters that everyone needed to know. William, the record tells the reader, had a mental health condition, and Augustine, the second man, refused to act human even when William asked him “in the name of God” to do so. This article explores several issues, including how William and Augustine know what monsters looked and acted like, how medieval English law defined monsters, and what medieval people understood about mental health.

Keywords: monster, law, England, Middle Ages, mental health



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The Case

In 1265, William Pilche walked along a high road in England near Manchester when he met “a terrible monster” (TNA: PRO ms C 66/83, m 22; CPR 1258-66, 407). William asked the monster to speak, adjuring him “in God’s name” to say something so that he might know whether this creature was a man or an actual monster. He might have even demanded that this monster reveal himself if he was indeed a person. Instead, the monster “uttered groans and refused to speak,” and William “rushed upon [the] monster and killed him” (TNA: PRO ms C 66/83, m 22; Turner 2013a; Turner 2013b). The so-called monster turned out to be Augustine le Fevere of Manchester, who wore a disguise. Either he considered terrifying people on the high road to be a joke, he was intoxicated, or something else was wrong such, for example his being unable to speak or having an inability to hear William (perhaps because of the disguise). Whatever his reasons for not speaking, Augustine was not groaning or laughing anymore. William killed him and would now face trial. But William had friends. Thomas de Ferrariis wrote to the crown to ask for a pardon since William, as described in the records, was “*fatuus*,” meaning “fatuous” and possibly indicating a learning or intellectual disability (Turner 2013b; Turner 2018); the original editor of this selection for the *Calendar of Patent Rolls* translated *fatuus* as “idiot,” but, I would argue, that neither the term *idiot* nor the term *fatuus* directly translate to the modern word “idiot,” which has, since the time of the original translation, fallen out of favor for good reason (CPR 1258-66, p. 407). Robert de Stokeport, the local coroner for the country of Lancaster and “other trustworthy persons” believed William’s story (Sabapathy 2014), either because William was known otherwise to be an honest and law-abiding individual and/or Augustine was known as a prankster or both. William was, indeed, pardoned.

William likely lived independently since he was walking alone without a companion. In medieval England at the time of this case, if William had been known to have mental health issue that was severe enough that he needed assistance (with self-care or social interactions), physical guidance (against getting lost or confused) or moral guidance (against overspending, overreacting, acting out, or violence), he would have been assigned a keeper or custodian and, if he had property, also a court-appointed guardian. Since no such person was mentioned, presumably William suffered only from a minor mental health condition, perhaps something like neurodivergence or a poor memory, which in the mostly illiterate Middle Ages would have been quite a detriment. And yet he was taken off guard and was quite unable at that moment of fright to distinguish reality from a game, so-much-so that he *believed* he was confronting a monster. The real questions now are: How did he, an individual living in a rural, late-thirteenth-century town know what a monster was? For that matter, how would Augustine know what “a monster” was in order to fashion a convincing costume and, moreover, to act like one? In

other words, what was the later medieval concept of “monster” and was it anything like our own? This article investigates medieval concepts of monsters at the public level, monsters in medieval English law, and what it meant to have a mental health condition in the Middle Ages.

Medieval Ideas Around Monsters

Scholars suggest that medieval monsters were depicted as morally and physically deformed, often their outer form reflecting an inner moral and ethical corruption. Their presence demarcated boundaries, “beyond which lies the unintelligible, the inhuman” (Cohen 1999, xiv). On maps, monsters warned of the edges between known and unknown lands and waters. In churches, they served as warnings of what might devour a soul that did not make it into Heaven. “An array of medieval artifacts, especially texts, reveal that a fascination with monsters, dismemberment, and the materiality of the body ...” permeated medieval culture (Cohen 1999, 63). Small, textual decorations struck Bernard of Clairvaux (d. 1153) as “ridiculous” as much as he was fascinated by the “beauty” of them. He writes:

What excuse can there be for these ridiculous monstrosities in the cloisters where the monks do their reading, extraordinary things at once beautiful and ugly? Here we find filthy monkeys and fierce lions, fearful centaurs [...]. Here is one head with many bodies, there is one body with many heads. Over there is a beast with a serpent for its tail, a fish with an animal’s head, and a creature that is horse in front and goat behind, and a second beast with horns and the rear of a horse. [...] One could spend the whole day gazing fascinated at these things, one by one, instead of meditating on the law of God (Clairvaux 1977, Letter 29; Line 2025, 305-6).

Bernard’s statement has a theme of the juxtaposition between the cultural fascination and presence of monsters and the European Christian ideals of social and religious laws that uphold order in the church and in each state and kingdom. His theme reflects the dual cultural context of that which is monstrous—otherness, corruption, nature, boundaries and borders, and chaos—and that which is human—godliness, regulated, regularized, and ordered (Edwards 2002; Jones & Sprunger 2002; Cohen 1999; Mittman 2012).

Many scholars point to medieval ideas of monsters as being inherited from the ancient Greeks and Romans, who believed “monsters were both warnings and demonstrations of divine might” such as the minotaur who was “produced because of divine wrath” (Urbanski 2024, 10). It was the resonance of ancient monsters that

infused and inspired medieval plays, stories, and sermon literature (Kearney 2009). Those stimulated medieval authors to invent their own, tales both William and Augustine might have heard more than once. And because the medieval Church used this collective cultural element alongside biblical stories, most medieval people believed not only that devils and demons were true, but also that fairies, dragons, and monsters were as well (Senecal 2025). It was possibly costumes from plays or local traditions that influenced Augustine's choice of disguise. Stories that these two men might have known included epic tales such as *Beowulf* (*Beowulf* ca. 750[?]; Hall 1892/2025) or "Bisclaveret" ("Werewolf") (Marie de France 12th c.; Weston 1900/2024) as well as biblical stories around such monsters as the Behemoth and the Leviathan, which appear in the Book of Psalms and in Job (Asma 2009, 64-7). What William thought he might be seeing was left vague in this Chancery record, but any of these monsters, whether a Behemoth or a werewolf or Grendel (from *Beowulf*), would have been frightening in person.

Medieval English Law and Monsters

In late medieval English law, a monster was defined by the mid-twelfth century in common law. Henry Bratton, one of the foremost commentaries on law, defined a monster as a person with severe physical difference (Bratton 1268, v. 4, 361-2, f. 438a-b; Friedman 1981). He writes:

If when the mother has given birth the child declines to a monster, and when it ought to utter a cry utters a roar, it then seems that the exception ought not to be good, because the child is a monster since it is not born in the likeness of a man. But I do not call a child a monster though nature has given it too few or too many members: too few, as where fingers are lacking or the like; too many, as where there are too many fingers or joints, as six or more where there ought to be no more than five, or if nature as given it useless members, or if it is bent or hump-backed or its limbs are twisted. And note that this exception likes both in a possessory action, as in an assise of mort[]d[']ancestor or novel disseisin, and in a proprietary, by writ of entry or a writ of right.

ITEM si cum partum ediderit, tamen partus declinaverit ad monstrum et cum clamorem emittere deberet emittit rugitum, et tunc videtur quod tenere non debet exceptio, quia partus monstruosus est cum non nascatur ut homo. Sed non dico partum monstruosum licet natura membra minuerit vel ampliaverit. Minuerit, ut in defectu digitorum vel huiusmodi. Ampliaverit, ut si plures digitos vel articulos, sicut sex vel

plures ubi non deberet esse nisi quinque. Vel si inutilia natura reddiderit membra, vel si curvus fuerit vel gibbosus vel membra tortuosa. Et notandum quod exceptio ista locum habet tam in causa possessionis sicut in assisa mortis antecessoris et novæ disseisinæ, quam in causa proprietatis per breve de ingress vel per breve de recto (Bratton 1268, v. 4, 361-2, f. 438a-b).

Bratton was commenting on persons claiming rights to property based on the writ of right, which was a common-law action used in opposition to the law of possession. In other words, the writ of right gave the rightful owner, now dispossessed of his or her property, regress as the “rightful” holder or owner of the land either through inheritance or gift against someone else who had usurped the property and now claims to hold it by possession (today sometimes called “squatter’s rights”). In medieval England after 1066, all of the land was technically “owned” by the crown. People either “held” through an agreement or right from the crown or his designee, often a lord or landholding gentry (Worby 2010, 39-67). Some towns or boroughs had an agreement with the crown to have governance over their own affairs and lands, and while they technically held land from the crown as a collective, unless they broke the king’s laws, he left them to themselves (Bateson 1904 & 1906). A few individuals were independent landholders with small farms; yet even they held from the crown or another “landlord” from which derives our term (Pollard 2000, 181-91). People could become dispossessed of land if the rightful heir was a child, ill, or otherwise unable to assert their right at the time the former holder/owner (often a parent) died. They would go to court with a case of *novel disseisin*, a case of being dispossessed of their land within mostly one generation.

Mort d’ancestor is much the same but the context has a longer timeframe. This petty assize (legal action) was used to restore lands to the rightful heir if a “stranger” (known as an “abator”) took control of the property at the time a former holder/owner died (Worby 2010). Sometimes lands taken by an abator would be possessed by the “wrong” family for generations until a relative of the original property-holder had the funds to go to court and “restore” it based on the “death of an ancestor-relative,” *mort d’ancestor*. They often proved their case, if the family’s holdings had been entered into the Domesday book or otherwise had a “paper trail” in the court system. Some families began intentionally missing a fee payment or some other petty mishandling of royal funds, just to have their fine entered into the court record as a way of marking that they, and no one else, held the lands. All this is to say that Bratton argues that individuals who looked or acted as “monsters” could be disinherited, which is what he means by writing, “the exception ought not to be good.” And yet he points out that those individuals who have minor physical differences are not “monsters,” and they have the right to inherit and can even

recover property if lost under a writ of right including *novel disseisin* and *mort d'ancestor*.

Medieval Medicine and Mental Health

In late medieval and early modern medical manuals and casebooks, mental health conditions, like today, were on a spectrum. Individuals with *mania* or who became a *furiosus* might act out in public or become dangerous. Other conditions, such as being *idiota* or *fatuus* had to do with intellect in which a person had difficulties with perception, cognition, or the memory. There are suggested recipes for conditions that were known (thought) to be caused by an imbalance of humors such as mania, melancholia (black bile disease), or *frenesis* (alt. *phrenesis*) and other such afflictions, including things that are likely connected to what our contemporaries might call dementia, depression, and bipolar disorder. These were normally included near the beginning of most medical manuals under “the head” as these volumes were arranged from the head down to the feet. For example, Gilbertus Anglicus (Gilbert the Englishman), writing before 1250, discusses various “sicknesses of the head, including “leesing of [a] man’s wit and of re[a]son,” “scotomye,” “frenzy,” “mania,” “lethargy,” “epilepsy,” and “apoplexy” (Gilbertus in Getz 1991, 6-31). Gilbertus does not, however, have any suggestions for a cure, only interventions in terms of medicine or medical procedures for intellectual disabilities to abate a symptom. William Pilche seemed to have something like the first condition, a “lessening of a man’s wit,” and not the others; he was not frenzied or lethargic, and not hallucinating, which he seemed to have feared.

In late medieval and early modern astrological medicine, some individuals sought relief from their experiences to something akin to hallucinations in which they said they could see non-human entities, such as angles, demons, or otherworldly pixies, gremlins, sprites, or other things. A good example of this type of condition can be found in Richard Napier’s casebooks. This case is from 21 February 1615 in which Napier attends the wife of Hugh Quicke of Clifton who brought her in to see Napier because she claimed to be “troubled in mind and often times tempted, she said, with an evil sprite to do herself mischief” (trou{ble}{d} in minde & often times tempted (shee sayd) wth an e{u}ill sprite to doe her selfe a misc{h}eife) (MS Ashmole 204, f. 41r; Kassel, et al. 2018, CASE 26406). While elves, sprites, and pixies were not necessarily considered monsters in medieval Ireland, Wales or England, they were “other” and not often sympathetic toward humans (Henderson 2025; Jolly 1996). Polina Ignatova and Emelie Fälton include these entities as “nature beings” in their work on the nature and the history of space (Ignatova & Fälton 2025, 66).

In the case of William Pilche, he was seeing a real entity, a person in a costume,

which is not the same as hallucinating. While he had a mental health condition, rather than seeing something that is not there, he was described as having trouble distinguishing reality from fantasy. This might mean that, according to medieval medical theory, he had *frenesy*, a condition in which the individual has trouble with their imagination; this is not necessarily what we might think of as “imagining things” or “fantasy” but rather that part of the mind that makes connections and inventions.

Gilbertus Anglicus distinguished between three major condition types: *frenesy* in the anterior brain, madness and loss of cognition in the media brain, and lethargy in the posterior brain. *Frenesy* (or *phrenesy*) seems to have been defined in the Middle Ages as a “loss of imagination,” as explained above. This condition was likely an intellectual one and should not be confused with *frenzy* (madness), a condition closer to “madness”. Gilbertus wrote that *frenesy* was caused by an *apostem* of choler (yellow bile). Later in his text, he says that the humors of blood, yellow bile, and black bile could coningle as an *apostem*, causing havoc in the media brain, and that it was phlegm or sometimes phlegm and yellow bile that was behind memory issues in the posterior brain (Getz 1991, 10-16).

Medieval brain theories varied over time, but by the fourteenth century most physicians and encyclopedists had settled on the three-ventricle theory with sensory input and imagination in the anterior brain, cognition in the media brain, and memory in the posterior brain (Turner 2021). Medieval medicine was based on the theory of the four humors which in turn was based on the ancient system of the four qualities, hot, cold, wet, and dry (Siraisi 1990). The humors – blood, phlegm, yellow bile, and black bile – continued to be in flux (with water as an alternate) until the later Middle Ages (York 2012, 7-8). Gilbertus Anglicus wrote little about how to combat such conditions of the brain, giving mostly explanations:

Other sicknesses are from humors that [have] been turned to postems in some part of the brain, as frenesy that is a postem of choler in the forepart of the brain; and madness and lessening of man's wit and reason that is a postem in the middle of the brain; and lethargy that is leaving a man's mind that makes him forgetful and is a postem in the back part of the a man's head [...].

Oþer sekenesses ben of humours þat ben y-turned to postemes in sum parti of þe brayn, as frenesy þat is a postem of coler in þe foreparty of þe brayn; and woodnes and leeing of mannes wit and of reson þat is a postem in þe myddel of þe brayn; and litarg[i]e þat is leuyng of mannes mynde þat makeþ him forȝeful and is a postem in þe hyndir party of a mannes hede; [...] (Getz 1991, 6).

A “*postem*” or an “*apostem*” is a common term in many medieval medical manuals. According to Faye Marie Getz, a leading authority of medieval medicine, “postem” is defined as a “morbid gathering of undigested or badly digested humors” (Getz 1991, 348). Gilbertus, then, was telling his readers that several of the leading mental health conditions of his day were caused by one humor or another being poorly dealt with in the body. The obvious solution to a medieval physician or other medically trained person was to get the body to reverse the problem – either to digest properly or to rebalance the humors such that the opposite humors counteracted what the “badly digested humors” had done to the body generally and more specifically to the patient’s mental health.

William, the man in the case in question here, seems to have had something wrong with his “imagination” and with his common sense, which was one of the senses in the anterior brain along with the other five senses in medieval theories. If his condition was, according to medieval medical and brain theory, in the anterior part of his brain, he either had the condition of “*frenesy*” or the related conditions of being “*idiot*” or “*fatuus*.” And, indeed, he was said to be *fatuus* in the record, which fits in that he had trouble distinguishing a disguise from a real monster. William, therefore, appeared from all accounts to have condition effecting his anterior brain within medieval medical theory.

A Few Conclusions

Medieval English people used the term “monster” in two ways. The first is to describe humans who might have severe physical differences because they were no longer human in appearance and were, therefore, considered to have a semi-human form like monsters. While this is anathema to our contemporary ideas around individuals with disabilities and certainly might be “triggering” for some readers [my deepest apologies], the concept was discussed in several legal commentaries of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. Most of these legal specialists agreed that while minor physical difference would not bar individuals from inheritance, major differences could if argued in court.

The second idea behind the word “monster” in medieval England is this fanciful corruption of a human-like or animal-like creature with intelligence that had malice toward humans or an animal drive to destroy them. As Philip Line writes, “In the Middle Ages a variety of semi-human beings or animal-human hybrids were considered *monstra*. Some were of classical mythological origin, while others derived from ancient Greek and Hellenistic travellers’ or travel writers’ tales, most of them probably distortions of reality but some fictitious” (Line 2025, 297). Among other medieval authors, Augustine of Hippo (d. 430) writes that there are individual people who have monstrous forms in all societies, but he questions

the idea of “monstrous races,” writing “either these things that are written about some races do not exist at all, or if they do, they are not humans...” (Augustine in Dombart & Kalb 1955, liber XVI, line 299).

When William Pilche met up with his neighbor, Augustine le Fevere, on a road near Manchester, he mistook him as a monster. Augustine wore a disguise that William, even with a limited intellectual ability, recognized as a “monster.” When William attempted to find the order, to stop the chaos, he demanded “in God’s name” for the being in front of him to declare himself to be human, to be part of the order and not of the chaos, and Augustine refused. William killed him. The judge and jury at William’s trial stood with him and left the monster where he lay, and the crown pardoned William Pilche for his error in judgment and the death of Augustine le Fevere.

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