

Conclusion: Taking the Long View on Medieval Disfigurement

Working on a project that explores the representation of and responses to acquired facial disfigurement in early medieval Europe, I have been struck by the sheer number of instances recorded in medieval evidence. The disruption of the facial features—by far the most visible of sites—resonates with medieval observers; it is threatened as a corporal punishment in legal sources, but penalized if inflicted by anyone other than the king; it features in folkloric tales, often as a warning against transgressive behavior; it is commented upon, often at length, to draw moral lessons. But almost all of this evidence comes from the pens of those observing or imagining facial disfigurement: like many apparently marginal groups in medieval society, the voices of disfigured people themselves are very seldom heard. Yet the patient acceptance of disfigurement or difference is also held up in medieval religious and secular texts as a sign of sanctity or humility before God. The medieval examples offer an opportunity to explore the ambivalence surrounding disfigurement, and try to draw out some questions regarding continuities in the history of people with disfigurements over centuries. Irina Metzler has raised the question as to whether the face-to-face society of the Middle Ages had any concept of disability, and asks whether individuals could have had a “disabled identity.”¹ In the present study, the social stigma associated with acquiring a visible facial injury in the early Middle Ages only seems to become an “identity” in legal records of the thirteenth century, when claiming to be a “maimed man”—a status that presumably needed to be permanent—enabled plaintiffs to avoid trial by physical combat. It is certainly the case that the number of examples of recorded

disfigurement increases as we move from the sixth century to the twelfth, and narrative accounts from the latter part of our period do appear to have focused in greater detail on facial appearance than earlier writers. But the exhaustive lists of personal injuries to the head and face contained in early medieval lawcodes suggest that overall levels of concern about facial appearance remained pretty constant in these centuries. The major change—in evidential terms at least—came about with the explosion of medical writings rediscovered in the twelfth century, and a concomitant and well-documented trend toward identification and classification precipitated by Western Europe’s engagement (including violence) with the Muslim world.

A substantial proportion of the instances of disfigurement recorded occurs in prescriptive material, and this needs to be acknowledged: the project of recording how people lived with disfigurement relies primarily on actual cases where we know the disfigurement happened. Yet this study has only been able to turn up two or three cases for the entire period where some form of first-person reflection takes place—Wipert, Thietmar, and Walchelin—all three quite late, and all three drawing specific lessons from their different appearance. The first question for further work on disfigurement is thus the nature of the records: at what point will these change from mainly looking *at* people with disfigurements, to a mixture of observations and accounts of the lived experience of looking different? Is the autobiographical account of becoming and being disfigured confined to the most recent century, or are clues to living with disfigurement embedded in earlier letters, diaries and narratives? The early medieval sample privileges reports of deliberate disfigurement over accounts of accidental injury, and focuses almost entirely on when the appearance of male, elite figures, from the lay or clerical sphere, was temporarily or permanently altered. Many lived with their disfigurement afterwards, but it is striking just how many facial injuries were associated with the word “ridicule,” and how this specific term persists in sources across our entire period.² In a medieval culture that valued honor *and* face, being laughed at, or being the object of not-so-amusing comments, was just as much an injury as physical damage.

What is missing, quite strikingly, is any expression of disgust: here, modern theorists have introduced a concept that is largely absent from the medieval sources. William Ian Miller may relate modern disgust responses to earlier periods, but the “barbarically loathsome” actions of a few were presented with horror expressed at the *actions*, not their results.³ Authors