



AN ANTIPODE TO BEAUTY: THE MISBEGOTTEN IN WESTERN NARRATIVE

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My thesis is that our traditional unfair treatment of the misbegotten follows lines of evolutionary influence. In addition, important hints as to the biological nature of beauty may be discerned in the all-too common stigmatization of people deprived by facts of their birth. Indeed, the pernicious mental structures involved may be discerned in patterns of social behavior, common themes in folklore and, perhaps most troubling, classics of Western narrative fiction.

Much of the necessary dialectics is evident in the language we speak; here I will focus on English. Why is that "bastard" should mean both "child born out of wedlock" and "scoundrel," whereas "noble" denotes both those born of high estate and those possessing a good character? "Incestuous" is inevitably pejorative in force, even when applied to non-sexual relationships. Indeed, our bias against illegitimate and incestuous offspring is easily exceeded by our reactions to those unfortunates who have suffered congenital or birth defects or have been the victims of disease or accident early in childhood. Think of the etymology of "misconception." Note how the following adjectives both refer to consequent abnormalities and also carry negative moral weight: monstrous, ill-natured, unshapely, misshapen, grotesque, unnatural, deviant, queer, freakish, weird, miscreated, crooked, twisted, warped, crippled, hideous, horrible, frightful, dreadful, repulsive, repugnant, loathsome, perverted, malformed, disfigured, distorted, contorted, hunchbacked, mutant and misbegotten. Why is it that our unfortunate "crooked man" walks "a crooked mile," or that the English lexicon contains such phrases as "ugly as sin" or "ugly as the wrath of God." By contrast, my computer thesaurus informs me that synonyms for beauty include excellence, perfection, and virtue. Clearly our vocabulary for ugliness is derived from our terminology for the misbegotten, even though their misfortune is not at all their fault.

The consequences of such nomenclature may be severe. Rarely are any impairments more than part of the picture. Such terminology, however, encourages the beholder to react in a more extreme fashion, in effect, to discount the afflicted entirely. But the issue gets worse when we examine traditional attitudes towards them and, worst of all, their usual depiction in classics of Western narrative.

I am utilizing the *misbegotten*, which in my usage refers to illegitimate, incestuous and abnormal offspring, to examine the obverse of Frederick Turner's notion that our sense of beauty is a faculty shaped by natural selection to give us insight into the deepest patterns of the universe (199). Verily, beauty may be truth, as we may see in our preference for spirals and rectangles devised according to the so-called "golden section." But we should consider health as important evidence supporting Turner's hypothesis. Clearly physical beauty correlates to a large extent with well-being. Modern cosmetics and clothes, as well as occasionally perverse fashions, somewhat blur the picture, but it is hard to imagine someone being attractive without also being in good physical condition. This also applies to mental beauty. Although exceptions abound in such movements as decadence and expressionism, generally the mind is best capable of producing art and/or aesthetic notions when well.

But the best evidence of all is that health largely feels good. The evolutionary significance of bodily sensations has been central to sociobiology starting with the first page of Edward O. Wilson's *Sociobiology: The New Synthesis* (1975, p. 3). As David Barash once put it, sugar tastes sweet because we are evolved to prefer fruit when it is at the peak of its nutritional value for us (1979, pp. 288-89). The same, so it seems to me, must apply for health. It may not be so much that well-being feels good or tastes sweet as it is that it does not feel bad. Most diseases and injuries are accompanied by painful sensations, or at least discomfort. Whether a pang reminds us to lift a foot off a sharp object or to rest a blistered area, such feelings are nature's way of prodding us into more healthy behavior.¹ Surely we have all heard this argument before. Beauty generally correlates with viability; when we look or feel good, we are probably more healthy than

not, and therefore, more likely to continue to thrive in our domain and engage in reproductively successful behavior. This is part of what beauty *is*, and there is little wonder that we find it to be so attractive. Quite obviously this constitutes one of the strongest feedback loops central to Turner's hypothesis.

Another indication the beauty and health are linked is the *average* nature of beauty. Recent studies of human physical beauty suggest that we prefer faces which are average in appearance. This was demonstrated by tests involving comparisons of portraits made up of composites of 4, 8, 16 and 32 faces. The more faces that contributed to a single picture, the more popular it became (Gangestad, Thornhill and Yeo 1994, p. 80). The obvious consequence of this is that beauty, like health, is normative, if not conservative in nature. These findings accord with Aristotle's maintenance of the superiority of the normal. Faces are attractive for what they possess and, perhaps more importantly, what they do not. Secondly, by being attracted by the average, we will tend to exclude the unusual. One reason for this involves social acceptance; given the xenophobia of traditional societies, it probably pays to look like everyone else, whereas to stand out in a crowd entails risks. A more important consideration is that having a common appearance assures the beholder that one is relatively free of disease and disabilities. The composite average face created in the test, for example, is likely to be symmetrical, a condition which largely correlates with heterozygosity and resistance to pathogens (Gangestad, Thornhill and Yeo 1994). If a contagious disease is suspected, then aversive behavior makes sense. And it also works where genetic deficiencies may be at fault. Surely such qualities are crucial in the selection of a prospective mate, if, after all, the tendency of life forms is to pass one's genes into the next generation *and beyond*. As a result, we are generally repelled by ill-health, much as we are by ugliness.

In fact, we are so conditioned to prefer healthy behavior that vitality and viability are pretty much co-synonymous with good. Idealized, i. e., normative and symmetrical, body types typically serve as physical images of virtue. The classical pantheon is populated with the likes of

Adonis and Venus and so is our art since the Renaissance. This bias affects almost everyone's experience. In their study of facial attractiveness, Steven W. Gangestad, Randy Thornhill and Ronald A. Yeo state:

few findings in social psychology are more robust and replicable than the finding that individuals respond more positively to physically attractive than unattractive persons. Moreover, researchers have generated an abundant literature on the influence of attractiveness that reveals, among other effects, that the mere belief that another person is attractive can influence interactions with them ... association with a physically attractive person can enhance one's social status ... and beautiful people are thought to possess many other desirable attributes (1994, pp. 73-74)

This, of course, is hardly news in Hollywood, or anywhere else. There is, however, little justification for the common association between beauty and talent, for Gangestad, *et al.*, note that "Research on physical attractiveness generally has yielded weak correlations with many measures of personality and intellectual functions" (1994, p. 80). What fascinates me here is that we, nevertheless, often jump to an unjustified and invidious conclusion, namely, that we can discern essential aspects of a person's moral character on the basis of their physical appearance. We have no other dependable indices into another person's personality. Given the heated competition we face from within our own species, clearly we feel a need for one. But this equation of beauty with virtue of little help. What is interesting, if not disturbing, is that it is so popular, a consideration we adduce to natural selection, if only because it moves us to associate ourselves with more popular, i. e., "beautiful," genes. After all, the ethologist's job is to explain species-specific attributes in terms of their contributions to fitness, which must entail reproductive success (Daly and Wilson 1984, p. 487).

These rough notions prompt us to consider the obverse of Turner's sense of beauty. Do these forces work in reverse to the point that we are repelled by images of ill health? Beauty may

be defined both by what it is and what it *is not*, namely, that it denotes an absence of ill health and defect. Biological influences shaped by natural selection may be bi- or multi-polar in nature. We expect that more than one genetic factor will influence such complex behaviors as we find in art. For example, what we find interesting, and attracts us, is at the same time relatively not boring, a condition we flee. Such a cross-vectored model allows for admixtures of both elements and therefore much greater degree of individual detail in biological outcomes. A secondary consequence is that we are often ambivalent regarding the misbegotten, that our reactions can be contradictory. Sometimes the ugly is, at the same time, somewhat beautiful, and vice versa. There is no rule that life or art has to be simple.

Sociologists, if not just about everybody, have long since noted the aversion elicited by people suffering from evident physical and mental defects. Genetic considerations may best explain why we avoid a pain we could never feel, as with the impaired. Indeed, the repellent effect of some afflictions is such that unimpaired people closely associated with the misbegotten, such as family members, will also find themselves discriminated against (Darling and Darling 1982, pp. 36, 64). They, of course, could be carriers of the defective genes, but this stigmatization also threatens non-relatives. Aversion makes sense in the case of contagious disease. Indeed, nature often practices a form of overkill in that we avoid the infirm even when there is no danger of contagion. Such includes social, as opposed to sexual behavior, with those infected with HIV. Here, at least, there is some plausible rationale; one might well think it better to practice ultra safe behavior, just in case HIV later proves to be socially transmittable. But aversion is also typical with non-contagious cases, such as those suffering from birth defects and childhood diseases and those who have merely been the victim of some disfiguring accident. There is little need for nature to make distinctions which were well beyond the abilities of our distant forbears, let alone other species. Nor must nature accord with our present notions of morality or fairness. Since the next generation will be determined, insofar as we can shape it, by

reproductive results, it matters little which means are utilized, as long as the outcome is successful.

For the same reason, the reproductive process elicits undying interest, given that it constitutes the bottleneck between one generation and the next. Certainly this is reflected in our literature, which Alexander Argyos described as a society's means of choosing amongst its possible futures (1991). We could apply his notion to fictional depictions of social utopias, a popular genre over the past few centuries of political change. But it is even more true in the enormous literature of mate selection. Here it should be noted that reproductive success is not established by getting one's genes transmitted into the next generation, but doing so in such a way that they will also make it into the next one and the next one and so on. So quantity of production in itself will not suffice. A contending strategy is to limit fecundity so as to maximize the quality of one's offspring, which is advisable, considering the limitation of most parents' resources. If we define viability as an offspring's "capacity to convert parental assistance into fitness," that is, by becoming a parent itself, then quality control becomes vital (Daly and Wilson 1984, pp. 489, 492). There's little point to becoming a parent if grandparenthood is not in the offing. It therefore make sense to align oneself with a possessor of popular genes (i. e., an attractive mate). Of course, this line of thought, properly extrapolated, has dire consequences for those regarded as misbegotten.

A glance at the enormous anthropological literature on marriage customs demonstrates the great care virtually every society takes to maximize its reproductive success. Whether this involves negotiations between interested parties, usually relatives, or actual courtship, the mate-selection process can be interpreted as one of examining the resources, physical, intellectual and material, that each partner brings to the pairing. And the contract is usually sealed with some sort of religious sanction, often quite elaborate. This exaggerated concern for matrimony is more understandable when we consider that it is a society's best opportunity to direct its genetic future.

Our notion of quality-control helps us to account for the various steps societies take to prevent or nullify the reproduction of the misbegotten. A number of anthropologists have said that all social organization is founded on incest-avoidance. The proximate reason, such as members of a given society are likely to explain, may be needs of affiliation, but the ultimate cause is more likely to avoid the deleterious effects of recessive genes being aligned in a homozygous manner. That many other species also practice forms of incest-avoidance leads us to the same conclusion (Bischof 1972; Bixler 1981). Studies of incestuous offspring suggest that significant defects, including stillbirth, may amount to one half (Seemanova 1971). This nontrivial danger may well be the impetus for the intricate nomenclature most societies develop to denote interrelationships within an extended family. James W. Twitchell argues that

The naming function of language by which we assert the father/mother /sister/brother/uncle/aunt/cousin placement may well be one of the strongest announcers and enforcers of the taboo. The process of naming is the process of categorizing, which is the unconscious establishment of limits, in this case sexual limits. (1987, p. 9)²

The lesser social, sometimes civil, crime of illegitimacy is dissuaded by sanctions, societal, religious and legal. Clearly the misbegotten are rarely wanted.

The misbegotten are, however, virtually impossible to prevent. Perhaps societies could strengthen their safeguards against incest and illegitimacy, but even capital punishment has proved to be an imperfect deterrent. Another deterrent may be narrative. Twitchell contends the "horror myths are primarily incest-forbidding fairy tales instructing the younger family members whom to avoid sexually in order not to produce monsters" (1987, p. xii). As if in illustration, Stith Thompson's *Motif-Index of Folk-Literature* (1955-58) lists tales which include such monstrous and/or unexpected progeny as bodiless heads, headless bodies, limbless and boneless babies, those missing one or more organs, two-headed and animal headed children, some made of part iron, half fish, others born hairy, sometimes including beards, others bearing serpents, armor or other

objects, including an Eskimo child who arrives wearing a feathered parka (cf. entries T550.6 to T552.8). Sometimes it is not a child at all that the mother bears but animals, fruits and evil spirits (see entries T554 to T556).

Nevertheless, abnormalities will persist. According to UNICEF, at least one tenth and possibly as much as one fifth of all children are born with or soon acquire impairments that will hamper their development (cited in Darling and Darling 1982, p. 3). Up until recently there has been very little a society can do about congenital and birth defects, other than the deterrence of incest, good obstetric care and reducing the reproductive opportunities for those who already suffer what seem to be genetic defects. Even the latest medical technology does not suffice. As of 1981 a quarter of a million Americans were born with congenital impairments (Darling and Darling 1982, p. 3).

So what does a society do with these less-than-perfectly desired but just the same inevitable progeny? Illegitimate children in some groups are deprived of a proper name and patrimony, making it more difficult for a male bastard to engage in legal reproduction, given that he is often legally denied the capital which is necessary for wedlock. Although social sanctions have been relaxed considerably in the West in recent decades, illegitimate children were often stigmatized as "an emblem of lust, and, even worse, of a violation of the marriage sacrament which is putatively God's disposition for both sexuality and parenthood on earth" (Goscilo 1990, p. 32). As a result, they may even be denied "common privileges in the church" (Goscilo 1990, p. 32). The lot of incestuous children, if anything, was worse (Teichman 1982, p. 181). But their situation pales by comparison to that of impaired children. Children with evident defects still suffer social stigmatization. Although we will later examine cases of generous, even extraordinary treatment, they are commonly regarded in Western society as subhuman, menaces, objects of ridicule and shame or of pity. Aristotle referred to them as *lusus naturae* ("jokes of nature"; Fiedler 1978, p. 231). Many were institutionalized or marginalized into ways of life far from the social mainstream, such as industries for the handicapped. This was a great improvement over

their becoming beggars or the leading attractions in so-called "freak shows". Worse were forms of deprivation, assignment to insufficient systems of care, such as indifferent foster parents, and variations on the ancient practice of exposure. This is not a trivial matter, even in a modern society. For example, infant mortality rates for illegitimate children exceeds those of legitimate offspring in England and Norway by 50 to 150 percent (Teichman 1982, p. 105). We can only imagine that the distinction between impaired and unimpaired children would be greater. A common and painful quandary in hospitals is whether to administer or deny care for severely defective infants. Often the issue comes down to whether medical intervention might promise the child sufficient "quality of life."

Traditional social attitudes towards the misbegotten appear to enable more severe sanctions against them. All three categories, illegitimate, incestuous, and abnormal, figure prominently as motivations for infanticide. Deformity is the most common motivating factor. The Greeks and Romans commonly killed defective progeny, as do the Serbs. Infanticide persists despite legal sanctions, such is the force of this practice which probably dates back to the Pleistocene (Hausfater and Hrdy 1984, p. xxix). Another indication of this heritage is that studies show that six year old children express negative feelings towards the handicapped (Darling and Darling 1982, p. 33).

Martin Daly and Margo Wilson claim that ethnographic surveys of infanticide concur with predictions arising out of evolutionary theory. Quality control becomes vital in the case of limited parental resources. It is difficult and sometimes fruitless to attempt to raise a severely impaired child to maturity, especially if success is predicated in his reaching the next round of the reproductive process. Much the same is indicated in cases of illegitimacy, where the child lacks a properly supportive family and may prove an impediment to his mother's future offspring (1984, p. 492-93). Notably, other widespread motivations for infanticide include cases of privation, close birth spacing and multiple births, whereupon families have to make cost-benefit analyses, and death or incapacity of the mother (Daly and Wilson 1984, pp. 489-91; Scrimshaw 1984, pp.

445-46). Infanticide is not taken lightly and the choices are not always negative; for example, Daly and Wilson suggest that "an older mother with little reproductive future may be relatively willing to raise a deformed child" (1984, pp. 502, 492). Glenn Hausfater and Sarah Blaffer Hrdy concur that such patterns of infanticide, however horrific, accord with the concept of inclusive fitness,

the most reliably documented cases of infanticide involve parents and are best described as parental manipulation of their progeny... Among humans one or both parents appear to make a conscious or unconscious calculation concerning the cost of the infant, probable current and future demands on parental resources, alternative uses to which those resources might be used as well as the future breeding options that the parents might have. The infant's own future survival and breeding or marriage prospects may also be taken into account. (1984, p. xxvi).

Susan C. M. Scrimshaw predicts that due to the high costs of medical treatment, that even with technological advancement, infanticide of the deformed "will be slow to disappear" (1984, p. 461).

Of course, the societies covered in Daly and Wilson's survey know little or nothing about genetics, but for reasons of their inclusive fitness as a group, they have long behaved as if they knew. Such, of course, holds for all organisms shaped by natural selection. An important consideration in this regard is that, as far as the selective process is concerned, the ends justify the means. Nature is perfectly immoral in that all that matters is relative reproductive success. For this reason, infanticide and other forms of maltreatment of the misbegotten are often justified by the actual practitioners for reasons that are quite distant from Darwinian theory. Some societies regard severely deformed children as ghosts or demons, possibly the better to get rid of them as part of a perceived struggle with supernatural powers (Daly and Wilson 1984, p. 492). For other communities, they were prime subjects for priestly sacrifice, given that supernatural powers had

already interfered with their normal development (Fiedler 1978, p. 229). Fetomancy, divination from fetuses, and teratoscopy, from abnormal births, can be traced back to Babylon 2800 B.C.E. (Fiedler 1978, pp. 20-21). During the Salem witch trials, Christians dispatched such unfortunate infants arguing that they were the "products of witchcraft." This followed the then common belief that "God might on occasion permit the agents of Satan to alter the child in the womb into such horrific forms. And in these cases it was arguably the duty of the pious to destroy his evil work" (Fiedler 1978, p. 229). This line of reasoning is reflected in contemporary horror films like *Rosemary's Baby* and *The Omen*. Note that with these "justifications," we have already entered the realm of fiction. Stith Thompson's *Index* lists many tales and myths of infanticide, exposure and abandonment. A number of these involve cases of illegitimacy, incest, abnormalities and indications of supernatural parentage (1955-58, entries S311 to S325.0.1). Our term "monster" is commonly traced to "moneo," "to warn," and to "monstro," "to show forth" (Fiedler 1978, 20; Dudley Wilson 1993, p. 6). In the Renaissance, monsters were believed to come from God and the Devil, to be caused by stars and comets, copulation with animals and by the pregnant mother's imagination (Huet 1993, p. 1). The common belief that "monsters are sent deliberately by God as a warning against sin" may be reflected in the guilt parents often feel after bringing an impaired child into the world (Dudley Wilson 1993, p. 1; Darling and Darling 1982, pp. viii, 40). St. Augustine attributed them to original sin, saying, "If no-one had sinned in the world, the world would have been furnished and fitted only with things naturally good" (cited in Dudley Wilson 1993, pp. 25-26).

Some loathsome forms of genetic "quality control" persist in our own time. The 1930's saw a wave of forced eugenic sterilizations of those legally deemed to be mentally deficient. These measures are rarely heard of today, but pregnant women frequently undergo an amniocentesis so as to be able to forestall a severely impaired child.³ Even some laws proposed to ban abortion make an exception for cases of incest. The most infamous attempt at genetic controls was, of course, Hitler's Final Solution. We, hopefully, need no reminding that executors

of the Holocaust intended to wipe out Jews and Gypsies, seen in Nazi eyes as racially deficient. What is less known is that the Third Reich promulgated a "Law for the Prevention of Heritable Diseases," whereby "adult euthanasia" was carried out in secret in concentration camps, based on the notion that "all bisymmetrical malformations being hereditary, those suffering from them should be kept from reproducing" (Fiedler 1978, p. 254-55).

Another particularly pernicious dialectic was to characterize the misbegotten as villainous. According to Betty Pieper, "Ancient moral writings link physical perfection with moral superiority and physical 'blemish' with inner and spiritual deficit" (Darling and Darling 1982, p. ix). The US census used to count handicapped people and willful criminals as one class (Darling and Darling 1982, p. ix). The depiction of the misbegotten as menaces is particularly evident in pages of our narrative classics which are often structured on the same fictional justifications made for infanticide. We have already noted that there is little correlation between appearance and character. There is also little to indicate any strong relationship between birth facts and moral nature. Nevertheless, as Jenny Teichman observes, "The wicked bastard is an archetypal figure, a conveniently 'typical' villain who appears in many stories and plays" (1982, p. 123). No doubt societal mistreatment will inspire bitterness, disorientation and a spirit of revolt, but this all-too-quickly-made equation between being misbegotten and malign belies deep-set patterns of bias. Why is it that Shakespeare's Edmund in *King Lear* or John in *Much Ado about Nothing* have to be bastards?⁴ As Edmund asks the same question, the equation affronts rationality:

Wherefore should I

Stand in the plague of custom, and permit
The curiosity of nations to deprive me,
For that I am some twelve or fourteen moonshines
Lag of a brother? Why bastard? Wherefore base,
When my dimensions are as well compact,
My mind as generous, and my shape as true,

As honest madam's issue? Why brand they us
 With base? With baseness? Bastardy? Base, base?
 (*King Lear* 1.2.2-10)

Both Shakespeare and Edmund ignore this logic, for the villain immediately proceeds to announce his plan to deprive his legitimate brother of his patrimony. Teichman notes that the social marginalization of bastards may impel them to gain by force what they were denied by custom. She cites Archelaus in Plato's *Gorgias* and Abimelech in the Old Testament as examples of illegitimate sons who similarly overthrow their rightful leaders by violent means, killing legitimate relatives (1982, p. 126-27). She concludes, "Parricide, murder and usurpation are the primary qualities of fictional bastards" Once reason is that they are ill-made. Teichman adds,

Bastards in books are often tainted with diseases or deformity; they also suffer from such disabilities as alcoholism, drug addiction and violent, uncontrollable rages... Diseases and deformities stand in part for punishment, but they also express the idea that bastards, because they are not members of proper families, are not proper members of the human family. They are tainted, monstrous, incomplete, betwixt-and-between, mongrels--a different kind of animal from *us*. Addictions and rages, on the other hand, symbolize the sexual uncontrite of the parents. The lawless act generates a lawless being. (1982, p. 128)

Such is Dostoevsky's Smerdyakov in *The Brothers Karamazov*. The illegitimate child of a retarded beggar woman raped by Fyodor Karamazov, Smerdyakov kills his father, but uses his epilepsy to cover up his crime and to maximize his disruption of his legitimate family.

Abnormal characters, if anything, are depicted in a more evil light. Few artists were ever as sympathetic to the severely deformed as Victor Hugo, author of *The Hunchback of Notre*

Dame and a polemicist against their exploitation as beggars and in freak shows. Nevertheless, here is how he explains his depiction of the Triboulet in *The King's Amusement*:

Triboulet is deformed, Triboulet is unhealthy, Triboulet is a court buffoon --a threefold misery which renders him evil. Triboulet hates the king because he is king, the nobles because they are nobles, and he hates ordinary men because they have not humps on their backs. His only pastime is to set the nobles unceasingly against the king, crushing the weaker by the stronger. He depraves the king, corrupts and stultifies him; he encourages him in tyranny, ignorance, and vice. (1909, p. 266)

We do not have to accept Hugo's logic. Based on a historical character, Triboulet compares himself to the handsome but profligate King Francis I of France. As he makes the following deduction, his thinking touches on the aversive behavior he elicits. He has a case to plea, but it in no way justifies the scale of his evil intentions:

Abjection base! where'er I move to feel
 My foot encumbered with its galling chain.
 By men avoided, loathed and trampled on;--
 By women treated as a harmless dog.
 Soh! gallant courtiers and brave gentlemen,
 Oh, how I hate you!--here behold your foe;
 Your bitter sneers I pay you back with scorn,
 And foil and counter mine your proud desires.
 Like the bad spirit in your master's ear
 I whisper death to each aspiring aim,
 Scattering, with cruel pleasure, leaf by leaf,
 The bud of hope--long ere it come to flower.
 You make me wicked:--yet what grief to live

But to drop poison in the cup of joy
 That others drink!--and if within my breast
 One kindly feeling springs, to thrust it forth
 And stun reflection with these jingling bells.
 Amidst the feast, the dance, the glittering show,
 Like a foul demon, seek I to destroy,
 For every sport, the happiness of all
 (1909, p. 299)

Triboulet apparently suffers from both achondroplasia, the genetic disease of dwarfism, and kyphosis, the forward collapse of the upper part of the spine, which could be due to a variety of causes. Albeit Hugo's play could hardly be characterized as a classic, possibly save for in France, *The King's Amusement* and Triboulet have enjoyed an impressive afterlife in one of the greatest and most popular of all operas, *Rigoletto*. In his major aria, Rigoletto bluntly sings, "Oh men! Oh nature! / You have made me a base villain! (Verdi n. d., n. p.)

Triboulet/Rigoletto, as we shall see, has a human side which compensates in large part for his moral deficiencies. Such can not be said for Shakespeare's Richard III, another hunchback who contrives his villainy directly and crassly from his deformity:

I, that am rudely stamped, and want love's majesty
 To strut before a wanton, ambling nymph;
 I, that am curtailed of this fair proportion,
 Cheated of feature by dissembling Nature,
 Deformed, unfinished, sent before my time
 Into this breathing world, scarce half made up,
 And that so lamely and unfashionable
 That dogs bark at me as I halt by them--
 Why, I, in this weak piping time of peace,
 Have no delight to pass away the time,

Unless to see my shadow in the sun
 And descant on mine own deformity.
 And therefore, since I cannot prove a lover
 To entertain these fair well-spoken days,
 I am determined to prove a villain
 (*Richard III* 1.1.16-30)

What is surprising, if not profoundly disturbing, here is that Richard III's opening speech might be received by the viewer as a plausible expression of character. But, then, our traditional myopia of the misbegotten reduces characters drawn on them to two unrealistic dimensions. Other similar moral and physical degenerates include Shakespeare's Thirsities (*Troilus and Cressida*), the Moor Aaron (*Titus Andronicus*), and Richard Wagner's Niebelungen in *The Ring of the Niebelungen*.

The misbegotten depicted in Western narrative defy statistical probabilities in that they are almost always male. Admittedly, most speakers of English would not apply "bastard" to a woman, but the asymmetry is striking. The reason seems to be that society feels the threat from the misbegotten largely in the form of male sexuality. That healthy men might impregnate an impaired women is bad enough--such is the case with Smerdyakov--but patriarchy recoils against the notion of sexually active but abnormal men pursuing normal women. Notably, one of the most popular theories of abnormalities traces them to the pregnant mother's disordered imagination, which can include thoughts of illicit sex. In other words, myths reflect a patriarchal fear of men losing control over women. Such is the alarm elicited when Quasimodo carries Esmeralda up to his belfry, even though the hunchback is harmless. When the courtiers learn that Triboulet/Rigoletto has a mistress, they scheme to abduct her--unfortunately it turns out to be his daughter. Richard III's villainy is motivated by sexual frustration. The chief plot danger posed in Smetana's *The Bartered Bride* is that the stuttering Wenzl--truly a disability for an operatic character--will be able to force his suit on the heroine Marie. Indeed, narrative heroes are typically depicted as handsome, which promises well for their children, if they "get the girl" as the prize at the end of many plots. In this regard we could contrast Walter von Stolzing's mellifluous

singing with Beckmesser's grotesque vocalization in Wagner's *Die Meistersinger von Nurnberg*. The reproductive menace of the misbegotten is expressed most bluntly by Caliban in Shakespeare's *The Tempest*. Both illegitimate and abnormal--or merely a European's view of the recently discovered aboriginals of the New World--Caliban fails in his attempt to rape Miranda: "O ho, O ho! Would't had been done! / Thou didst prevent me; I had peopled else / This isle with Calibans" (*The Tempest* 1.2.349-51). On the other hand, Smerdyakov and Wagner's Alberich deviate from the norm in the opposite direction by being sexless. Indeed, in *Das Rheingold*, Wagner's dwarf renounces sex in order to pursue the Rhinegold.

Yet not all depictions of the misbegotten in Western narrative are negative. Beauty does, appearances notwithstanding, fall in love with the Beast, revealing an Adonis within. Sometimes superiority is associated with defect. Like the legendary King Arthur, many of the positive heroes of major novels are illegitimate sons. These include Tom Jones in Henry Fielding's novel of the same name, Lucien Sorel in Stendahl's *The Red and the Black* and Pierre Bezukhov in Tolstoy's *War and Peace* (Goscilo 1990, p. vii). A number of heroes are the bastard sons of divinities: Hercules, Achilles, Perseus, Theseus, Aeneas, Gilgamesh, Romulus and Remus (Goscilo 1990, p. 8). Wagner's Siegfried, incestuous son of Siegmund and Sieglinde, is a paragon amongst heroes, the only one able to cross the Magic Fire which deflects all who experience fear. Whereas we have to make some apologies for Triboulet/Rigoletto, clearly he is also a sympathetic portrait of a loving father. Much the same applies for the severely misshapen Quasimodo. But we have no trouble in perceiving the noble character of the clubfooted Oedipus in Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*.

If there is no strong link between appearance and character, between physical abnormality and deviant behavior, then, other things being equal, the misbegotten should behave in a largely normal fashion. Narratives, however, paint them in the extremes of evil and good. There are a number of possible reasons for this contrary tendency to extoll the misbegotten. Indeed, they are sometimes venerated. Various societies refer to the impaired as being holy or saintly. Perhaps it is because they represent cases where divine powers have interceded in human affairs. In France

and Italy, for example, it is regarded as good luck to pat a hunchback's hump. With regard to inbreeding, one possibility is that there are possible *advantages* to incestuous reproduction in that matching strengths will be augmented. Such behavior distinguished a number of royal dynasties in Egypt, the Incan Empire, Hawaii and Persia. As James B. Twitchell notes, the much-extolled Cleopatra was the issue of at least eleven generations of incest (1987, p. 11). Members of these dynasties certainly set themselves off from the common populace. Being misbegotten would seem to have this same effect in lending the character an alienated point of view, the better to see things objectively, which would help explain their popularity as novelistic protagonists (Goscilo 1990, p. 3). Meanwhile, there are various myths which entail paying a price for knowledge, as in the case of Oedipus (Hays 1971, pp. 121, 128). Lastly, mutations occasionally turn out to be advantageous and provide an adjunct to a necessary portion of exogamy. Such is the verdict of Hans Christian Andersen's "The Ugly Duckling," whose much-abused hero grows up to become a swan. It should not be forgotten that we are all the result of numerous mutations.

Still, it is usually not enough. Even in the case of misbegotten heroes who are noble in character, the outcome of their activities in Western narratives is usually disastrous. Oedipus tries to flee from the prophecy of parricide and blunders directly into killing a stranger who is his natural father and marrying another, who is his mother. In the meantime, he brings a plague upon Thebes. Quasimodo tries to protect Esmeralda, but in the end he watches her execution as a witch. Most painfully, Triboulet/Rigoletto tries to take revenge on his daughter's ravisher, but ends up killing his only child. Siegfried sets out with noble aims, but his incestuous parentage is reflected in his incestuous liaison with his half-aunt Brunnhilde (Rank 1992, p. 537). Never able to set the right course, he blunders into the greatest of all catastrophes, *Gotterdammerung*.

So it is that the stigma of the misbegotten is more of a semiotic wild-card. Their distinction marks them out as very unusual, when, in all actuality, they usually are not. But our Western heritage indicates that, because their existence touches on issues central to all of us, it is hard to imagine our ever being indifferent towards them.

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Notes

¹Recent technological developments complicate this line of thought. Whereas sweet fruit is good for us, for example, refined sugar is not. There are many other cases where relatively rapid cultural changes have made the results of biological evolution anachronistic. Whether there ever was a biological justification for the mistreatment of the misbegotten, certainly any continuing vestige of this bias is no longer appropriate. One effect of the differing paces of biological and cultural evolution is that genetic factors are exposed by their newly-gained inappropriateness, the better that we may examine them.

²Twitchell seems undecided as to whether incest-avoidance is ultimately motivated by genetic factors. He then goes on to say,

Marry your cousin in our society and you risk unbalancing your family,
not your progeny. In other words, the semiotics of incest--a social code
--may be far more potent than the biology of inbreeding--a genetic code.

(1987, p. 9)

If we accept the notion of overkill in social prescriptions--remember that there is also a powerful propensity to exploit reproductive resources available in the family--then there is no inconsistency in a social code appearing to outweigh a genetic code. Nature is not always precise. Just the same, Twitchell seems to contradict himself when he later says, "the primary advantage of sexual reproduction is genetic variation," hence, "incest avoidance is an a priori concern" (1987, p. 36). Part of the problem may be that there are also possible genetic *advantages* to incest. Twitchell notes that "If inbreeding occurs in a small and homogeneous population and lasts for generations, it exaggerates all genetic propensities, both good and bad" (1987, p. 11)

³ Sadly, in some countries being female constitutes a sufficiently severe "defect."

⁴Teichman also cites Faulconbridge in *King John* as another of Shakespeare's villainous bastard (1982, p. 127).

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