

INTRODUCTION: WONDERS AND MONSTERS IN EARLY MODERN EUROPE

Monstrous births were a source of fascination and fear in early modern Europe. In the first half of the sixteenth century they were of particular importance in the German-speaking territories of the Holy Roman Empire that became caught up in religious conflict, the Reformation and the Counter-Reformation. During this period intellectual and theological debates, widely circulated publications and visual culture reflected a preoccupation with phenomena that were simultaneously natural and unnatural. These ranged from showers of blood to strange comets and included the topic of this book: monstrous births. One of the most dramatic and iconic publications to report such wonders may well be a 1578 German-language broadsheet from Strasbourg. It informs the reader and viewer about the separate births in Italy of a seven-headed child and a horned child in January 1578 (Fig. I.1).¹ The child with seven heads had been born in Evorizo (Eusrigo), in the vicinity of Milan, to a woman of good repute in the community.² The other child, with four horns and a kind of loose skin cap, was born in Piedmont. How might people at the time have viewed these children? The seven-headed child would very likely have recalled for viewers the seven-headed beast of the Apocalypse, with the child's satyr-like legs adding an additional demonic element. For those people disposed to interpret the scene along apocalyptic lines, the child on the left-hand side of the image could also easily be associated with the second beast of the Apocalypse, marked by the horns on its head.

Not only are these children themselves both demonic and apocalyptic in appearance, but they are shown here in the context of a destructive storm and flood of biblical proportions. The town is clearly identified in the text as the 'town of Horb on the [river] Neckar'.³ That is, this is a German town that lies in ruins behind the two Italian monstrous births. The broadsheet text further reports that Horb was the site of a great flood and storm on 15 May 1578; events witnessed by the anonymous author of the broadsheet. The flood and storm had caused great devastation, killing and injuring many people and animals, destroying twelve houses and damaging many more. Perhaps most shockingly, however, the weather conditions had unearthed the headstones and the contents of graves

Warhaftige vnd schröckliche bildnuß vnd gestalt zwoer neuer leydigen vngewonlichen Mißgeburdt/dieses gegenwärtige Jar außkommen. Sampt der beschreibung des Erbärmlichen Wasserquesses / jüngst zu Horb im Land Wirtemberg/ den 15. Tag May/ dieses L. X. X. VIII. Jars voizgangen



Wie unsfuglich mag dise nun gegenwärtige zeit wol eynre rechte Wunderzeit heissen: seittemal im kurtzen also vil Wunder vnd zehen auff eynder fomen vnd folgen: das es frommen Herken eyn schreckens macht. Vnd warlich/das sie nicht gar on bedeutung vnd wirkung seien/sihet man leyder täglich hin vnd wider / fern vnd nahe/ an den wunderlichen onruhen/empörungem/kriegen vnd Sturvergessen/verfolgungen/verberungen/verhätereien/Menckelmdereien / falschen Lehren/einfallen fremdes Volcks/ Kriegsgeschreyen / plünderung fürnemmer Städte/ vngewonlichen krankheiten vnd Seuchen/ absterben hoher Leut/ Vngewittern/ wütenden Winden/ schwarzen Wasserquessen/ Mißgewächsen/ vnd endlich allenthalben om sich herum an der Vnmenßlichen vntreu vnd inistrauen/ an den vnchristlichen händeln/ dem vbersatz/ schinden/ Judenthen vnd Vorkauff/ an allerhand schand vnd lastern/ Gottslasterungen/ verachtung vnd verkerung Gottes Wortes/ verpottung fromer Leut warnung/ vngeschosam gegen Obren vnd Fürgekehrte/ vnd furkum/ an heutiger grosser sicherheyt/ vnd erkaltung aller Lieb. Vnd das man nun der jüngstergangenen Wunder/ die doch auch noch ihre wirkung zuweiltchten haben/ geschweige/ Als der erscheinung fremder Sternen/Cometen/Wundergesicht/ vnd Himmelsflammen/der verfinstierung Sonn vnd Monds/der Erdbiden/ vnd anderer schrecklichen fällen.

So besche vnd erwiege man allein dise beyde hie voizgebildete scheußliche Wundergeburten. Deren die eyn des nächstem verschinnet Jenner/ dieses gegenwärtigen Jars 78. zu Eovorige/ im Novareser Land/ des Meyländischen Gebiets/ ist von eynrer zimlich gestandenen Matronen an die Welt gebracht worden/ oberhalb mit sibem händen/ sampt so vil Köpfen gestaltet/ vnter welchen der fürnemst Köpff nur eyn Auge mittlen inn der sirm hatte/ vnd zwen Schwelmsoren daran. Vnterhalb aber hat es Zus wie eyn ander Viech oder Thier.

Die ander Mißgeburdt oder Scheusal ist gleichfalls auch im Jenner/ dieses 78. Jars/ inn gestalt/ wie hie im gemald angezengt/ geboren worden/ vnd dasselbig von eynem Weib inn Piemont.

Es hat auch der Ehrwürdig vnd Hochgelehrter Herr Doctor Simon Pauli/ Superintendentus zu Nostoc/ inn der jüngst verlossenen Franckforter Fastenmeh/ auch eyn dergleichen erschrecklich vnnatürlich Geburt/ so bald zu angang des Neuen Jars zu Grevesmülen im Land zu Neuchburg von eyns Schneiders Weib an tag gebracht worden/ inn truck ausgehn lassen/ vnd darbei eynne schöne Erinnerung vnd vermanung angeheuchelt/ dahin wir dan die Leut wollen gewisen haben.

Werd dise haben wir auch kurtlich den 15. tag des Mayens/ inn der Statt Horb am Neckar gelegen/ eyn Erbärmlich Gewässer ersart/ allda es durch eyn Wolckenbruch von den nächsten Bergen große Steyn gerissen vnd durch die Statt gefüret vnd alles was es angetroffen/ hinweg geschwället vnd geflöset hat. Auch als man im etwas zuwehren die Statt Horb außerte/ hat es durch die Mann hunder dem Spital eynen eynricht geschw/ vnd also vnterschen/ Leut vnd Viech/ Betreud vnd vnter frucht verfür/ vnd vilf/ Hülff gar langflöset die andern vnter/ das Wienhofgang gerissen/ die Weiden eingeworffen die Gebälgen vor der Statt außgehört/ vnd sie inn die Statt geschwenck/ also das die Leiden vnter den Lebendigen sint geschwollen/ sonderlich hat man vnter denselbigem eynen Sandbeteim wangeworffen/ die man fürs zuvor begraben hatte. Auch hat es andern jamer mehr angricht/ der hie zu lang wer zuerzelen. Aber aus erzetem hat man genug den vom Gottes jureffern wie ichwärtlich es abange/ wann er eynmal entbrinnet/ Darhalben wer es grof/ zu solche warnungen büßfertiglich zuerfennen/ ehe man noch gruelichers erfährt/ vnd Gott drwegt werde/ seinen Grimm gar vnter uns außzuschütten: Darvor vns Gott gnädiglich beschüze. Amen.

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Figure I.1: Two Italian monstrous births from 1578 against a German landscape, from Anon., *Warhaftige vnd schroecckliche bildnuß vnd gestalt zwoern neuer leydigen vngewonlichen Mißgeburdt ...* (Strasbourg: n.p., 1578). Photo courtesy of the Zentralbibliothek Zürich, shelfmark PAS II 15/33.

from the graveyard, and both a body in a shroud and a coffin are visible in the centre of image. The graves were disturbed, giving up the dead, 'just as the earth swam [i.e., moved] under the living'.⁴ The unearthing of graves lends a decisively apocalyptic air to the scene, recalling for audiences the events of the coming Day of Judgement when the dead would rise from the ground. However, the scene is not overseen by a merciful Christ, but instead by two looming and demonic monstrous births. It is the anger ('zorn') of God that dominates here. The author advises readers that they must pay close and penitent attention to 'warnings like these ... before one experiences something much more gruesome'.⁵ Several elements – two monstrous births, and a destructive storm and flood – are combined in this broadsheet with great graphic impact. They are intended to demonstrate that such signs were proliferating,⁶ and that they were 'not without meaning and effect'.⁷ The unlikely birth of a seven-headed baby, viewed by contemporaries as a real event, or at least an event with real significance, is presented here in a highly dramatic way that could scarcely have been imagined at the beginning of the sixteenth century.

Decades before this broadsheet from 1578, monstrous births had appeared in German print culture in a variety of forms. Cases that achieved notoriety ranged from twin girls born joined at the forehead near the town of Worms in 1495, to the hybrid-bodied Papal Ass that appeared in Rome in 1496 and later became an important figure in Reformation polemic. The great variety and plenitude of monstrous births were part of their appeal, and also, as the sixteenth century progressed, increasingly something to be feared and decoded as a sign of the coming Apocalypse. Monstrous births fascinated people at all levels of society, and were reported in both popular and learned publications throughout the sixteenth century. Broadsheets, pamphlets and books analysed and argued for the possible meanings of such phenomena, and in doing so tell us about the interests and concerns of early modern societies. In the last several decades there has been a revival of interest in the monstrous as an important element of the cultures of medieval and early modern European societies.⁸ The monster – variously defined – was not merely a marginal figure, but one that was richly symbolic and often utilized to represent and debate issues of morality, religion and politics, thereby putting them into concrete and easily grasped terms.

This book examines widely circulated representations of monstrous births that appeared in illustrated German-language printed publications from the very late fifteenth through to the late sixteenth century. It traces how this material developed in the context of the extraordinary religious and social changes that unfolded in German lands during the Reformation and its aftermath. While monstrous births were of interest across Europe in the early modern period, printed reports of their appearance were especially numerous in German lands. While some of the individual cases of child and animal misbirths examined here

may seem fantastic and physically unfeasible to modern readers, at the time they were reported and discussed as specific, real events. These children and animals were represented and perceived as tangible and immediate, both spatially and chronologically.

Early modern European monstrous births were almost exclusively represented in print. Indeed, monstrous births were almost never depicted in paintings in the sixteenth century, and there are few extant drawings.⁹ These different types of illustrated printed publications – books, pamphlets and broadsheets – often served different sorts of audiences: religious and secular, local and geographically dispersed, popular and elite, literate and illiterate. Nonetheless they also formed part of a shared culture and a close examination reveals many intersections between them. German publications of this kind undoubtedly formed a large part of a broader trend. Paula Findlen has observed that there was:

a rich publishing history of broadsheets, natural histories, and encyclopedias of the strange and unfamiliar that characterized the sixteenth-century love affair with the marvelous, and that catalogued the many pleasurable and terrifying ways in which nature made manifest the hand of God in the world.¹⁰

Findlen's study focuses on Italian materials, and her remark captures the vigorous programme of publication but not the political and social urgency of the religious context that became so distinctive in German publications.¹¹ Crucially, this story of the representation of monstrous births is inescapably bound up with a shift in the interpretation of monstrous births that occurred over the course of the Reformation. Robert Scribner pointed to the fundamental complexity of the monstrous birth when he asserted that 'the monster was an ambivalent figure, for it was both a sign and a direct revelation.'¹² Monstrous births occupied a strange place mid-way between the secular and the religious. Nonetheless, they were overwhelmingly interpreted as signs from God, and increasingly drawn into religious polemic.

This book argues for a growing, not decreasing, religious emphasis in understanding monstrous births during the sixteenth century; that, in fact, the representation of monstrous births became increasingly more apocalyptic in tone, or more likely to reference apocalyptic themes, over this period.¹³ To draw on Stuart Clark's definition, apocalyptic ideas at this time were 'based on beliefs concerning the appearance of the Antichrist, the second advent, the resurrection of the dead, the end of the world, and the Last Judgement.'¹⁴ This was a fundamentally conservative apocalypticism, distinct from the revolutionary, socially disruptive forces associated with millenarianism. In his classic study, Jean Delumeau also distinguished carefully between millenarianism and an apocalypticism tied up with the Last Judgement.¹⁵ Despite this conservative aspect, apocalypticism was certainly a theme that could be both vitriolic and divisive,

and it was strongly associated with Lutheranism and with Reformation debates and battles.¹⁶ As Clark argues, apocalypticism intensified 'the themes of warning, punishment and repentance'.¹⁷

While the representation of monstrous births flourished as a result of print culture, and developed in various ways, authors and artists were drawing upon a body of existing ideas, both classical and early Christian, and their medieval development. The most important and commonly cited early authors on monstrous births were Aristotle, Cicero, Pliny the Elder, the lesser-known but significant Julius Obsequens, and Augustine.¹⁸ Early views on monstrous births fitted into three systems. Aristotle proposed entirely natural explanations, and is distinctive for demonstrating no interest in the idea of monsters as portents. He ascribed the formation of foetuses, including deformed ones, to entirely physical causes and gave a primary role to semen. The concept of a perfect form, from which all creatures deviated to greater or lesser degrees, was the cornerstone of his theory. This concept contained an implicit moral condemnation of bodies that were furthest from the ideal, and especially of monsters.¹⁹ Cicero, on the other hand, emphasized the divinatory (prodigious) function of monstrous births and showed little interest in their physical causes. His book *De divinatione* considers monsters in the course of a dialogue that presents the case for and against divination.²⁰

Pliny and Augustine viewed the phenomenon as an aspect of nature's (and, in Augustine's case, also therefore God's) wondrous and essentially unknowable qualities.²¹ These two authors were particularly influential on late medieval and early modern thought on this topic, in which monstrous births were part of a divinely authored 'book of nature'.²² In his thirty-seven book *Natural History*, Pliny emphasizes the remarkable nature of multiple births – more than three children at once was considered a portent, 'except in Egypt, where drinking the water of the Nile causes fecundity'.²³ The deviations from normal births that Pliny discusses are relatively mild, and are not characterized by the fascination with extreme physical deformity in the human races and domestic animals characteristic of the early modern period. Instead, he primarily demonstrates a desire to enumerate the great and wondrous variety of possible types in the world, rather than fully accounting for their cause or meaning.²⁴ Several centuries later, the fourth- or fifth-century Roman author Julius Obsequens prepared his *Liber de prodigiis*, which reported wondrous and prodigious events that had taken place in Rome between 249 and 212 BC. Obsequens's book was enthusiastically taken up by humanists in the sixteenth century.²⁵ He viewed monstrous births and other wonders as portents and, like Pliny, was particularly concerned with enumerating their great variety. This focus on the marvellous variety of natural wonders helped fundamentally to shape late medieval and early modern attitudes to monstrous births.

Augustine was certainly the most influential early author to have written on monstrous births, above all because his *City of God* placed them within a Christian framework.²⁶ He emphasized that, while many people considered portents to be outside nature, they were in fact part of God's creation: 'an occurrence contrary not to nature, but to nature as we know it'.²⁷ For Augustine, monsters were strikingly visual phenomena:

just as it is not impossible for God to create whatever nature He chose, so it is not impossible for Him to change those natures which He has created in whatever way He chooses. This is why there has sprung up so great a multitude of those marvels which are called 'monsters', 'signs', 'portents' or 'prodigies'. If I chose to recall and mention them all, would this work ever come to an end? The word 'monster', we are told, clearly comes from 'to demonstrate' [*monstrare*], because monsters are signs by which something is demonstrated. 'Sign' [*ostentum*] comes from 'to show' [*ostendere*]; 'portent' from 'to portend', that is, 'to show in advance' [*praeostendere*]; and 'prodigy' from 'to speak of what is far away' [*porro dicere*], that is, to foretell the future.²⁸

In the seventh century Isidore of Seville echoed Augustine but gave a more explicitly negative meaning to monstrous births:

Portents and omens [*ostenta*], monsters and prodigies are so named because they appear to portend, foretell [*ostendere*], show [*monstrare*] and predict future things ... For God wished to signify the future through faults in things that are born, as through dreams and oracles, by which he forewarns and signifies to peoples or individuals a misfortune to come.²⁹

There was an intense interest in human and animal monstrosity in the medieval period, but it was more commonly directed towards the monstrous races³⁰ rather than the individual human or animal monstrous births that Isidore refers to here. Nonetheless, stories about individual births were recorded in diaries and, in a modest way in comparison to later print culture, were also circulated, mostly through personal correspondence.³¹ Several cases of conjoined twins were even visually recorded as simple stone relief sculptures in Vézelay and Florence.³² Monstrous births featured in historical annals, where they played a role, along with meteorological and other prodigies, as portents of dramatic political events or natural disasters.³³ Some preachers incorporated monstrous births into moralizing stories that formed part of sermons.³⁴ In the *Gesta Romanorum*, a collection of stories and exempla compiled early in the fourteenth century for use by English Franciscans, the birth of conjoined male twins is given a positive symbolic value:

There was a male child born, divided from the navel upward. Thus he had two heads and breasts, and a proper number of sensitive faculties to each. While one slept or ate, the other did neither. After two years, one part of the boy died, and the other survived about three days. ... My beloved, the child represents the soul and body of man.³⁵

Another fourteenth-century author, Nicole Oresme, wrote that variety was a normal part of nature and such creatures were not to be wondered at. Lorraine Daston and Katharine Park argue that attitudes like these were an exception to the more common understanding of monstrous births as negative portents.³⁶ Biblical passages influenced these negative medieval and early modern understandings of the origin, purpose and interpretation of monstrous births. The monsters that appeared in the Bible were generally not monstrous births like the child in the *Gesta Romanorum*, but singular monsters rich with prophetic meaning, like the four hybrid beasts that emerged from the sea in the dream of Daniel 7:1–28. In the Apocrypha, 2 Esdras 5:8 tells of how ‘menstruous women shall bring forth monsters’, amongst other signs of the coming Apocalypse.³⁷ Most important were the beasts of the Apocalypse in the New Testament Book of Revelation; the seven-headed beast became one important reference point for understanding monstrous births during the sixteenth century, as the 1578 monstrous birth of Eusrigo indicates. Daniel, Esdras and especially the Book of Revelation had been amongst those texts most often translated into German in the late medieval period.³⁸

Representations of biblical monsters were widely circulated in the sixteenth century, both textually and visually, thanks to a programme of translation and illustration fostered by the Reformation and the printing revolution, and monstrous births and biblical monsters were juxtaposed in the increasingly accessible print culture of post-Reformation sixteenth-century Europe.

In their exceptionally rich and stimulating co-authored study, *Wonders and the Order of Nature 1150–1750*, Daston and Park locate monstrous births at the heart of their history of wonder. They revise their earlier view that interpretations of monstrous births had progressed in a teleological fashion from a religious, or ‘superstitious’, system to one that was based on new scientific principles and a desire to observe and classify.³⁹ In their new study, they describe a world in which scientific and religious explanatory systems co-exist throughout the early modern period. Daston and Park’s remarkable study has opened up the topic in a way that invites new interpretations. The more detailed study of German materials in this book leads to some new conclusions and emphases. In particular, this book seeks to demonstrate that there was an unexpected number of positive representations of monstrous births clustered in the period before the onset of the Reformation. In addition, religious interpretations of monstrous births not only co-existed with scientific interpretations, as Daston and Park emphasize, but actually seem to have grown in strength during the sixteenth century and become increasingly apocalyptic in tone.

Robert Scribner’s seminal work on printed Reformation propaganda, *For the Sake of Simple Folk*, includes examples of monstrous births in the context of Reformation polemic.⁴⁰ In his essay ‘The Reformation, Popular Magic and the

“Disenchantment of the World”, Scribner noted that phenomena like monstrous births were, prior to the Reformation, part of a ‘moralized universe’ in which ‘moral deviance, both individual and collective, was reflected in natural deformity.’⁴¹ While this widely held but overly general view will be nuanced in this book, the statement clearly delineates the nexus between morality, religion and the physical world in the early modern period. Scribner goes on to argue that this viewpoint was deepened and expanded by Protestants, to create a world view in which moral failings, individual and collective, incurred terrible and wondrous punishments.⁴² As this book will demonstrate, Catholics, too, participated in the formation of this newly imagined world, shaped by religious disorder and the rise of print and with the specific reference point of monstrous births.

Scribner’s emphasis on visual culture when discussing monstrous births is particularly valuable for understanding the specifically visual aspects of their representation. The vigorous, graphically engaging visual images of the sixteenth century are central to this study. The etymological link between the word ‘monster’ and the verb *monstrare* (to show) goes back at least as far as Augustine, who saw monstrous births as demonstrating something significant in a visual form. Nonetheless, the relationship of monstrous births to the visual culture of the early modern period is little understood, perhaps because the topic has been neglected by art historians. Indeed, monstrous creatures were often represented during this period in prints that are, by the standards of the time, artistically crude, mass-produced and derivative. Yet these graphically forceful images are deserving of more detailed iconographic and stylistic analysis, as this book aims to demonstrate.

The sixteenth century offers a rich array of visual and textual materials for understanding natural wonders and prodigies. Indeed, the visual culture of early modern monstrous births is often best encountered through illustrated print catalogues.⁴³ These materials were first brought to scholarly attention by Aby Warburg’s seminal essay on prophecy and astrology in Martin Luther’s time, although monstrous births appear in it only incidentally.⁴⁴ The essay focuses upon the culture of prophecy and prodigies in late fifteenth- and early sixteenth-century German lands. Warburgian art historians including Rudolf Wittkower and Fritz Saxl also developed an interest in signs and prodigies.⁴⁵ Wittkower, in particular, was nonetheless dismissive of the appeal of ‘popular pamphlets’ to the ‘largest, worst educated and most superstitious section of the population ... After the invention of printing this method was chosen to advertise monstrosities far and wide.’⁴⁶ His comments underline the fact that it is only relatively recently that crudely printed and mass-produced broadsheets and pamphlets have received acceptance as useful sources for understanding widely held cultural attitudes.⁴⁷ More recent cultural and intellectual studies emphasize that monstrous births are capable of illuminating important social preoccupations.⁴⁸

This book is concerned with German-language materials, and recent German scholarship has demonstrated some aspects of the complexity of these sources, their great abundance and their relationship to broader social, cultural, political and religious issues.⁴⁹ Rudolf Schenda's work forms a crucial bibliographical foundation, and evidence of the widespread nature of the phenomenon.⁵⁰ In other European scholarly traditions, Jean Céard's groundbreaking French study of 1977 is oriented towards French material and towards literary culture, but is woven through with analyses of the Renaissance revival of interest in the culture of prodigies in the classical world, and the pan-European intellectual understanding of monstrous births during the sixteenth century.⁵¹

The incorporation of Warburgian visual analysis into cultural history has contributed to a broader sense of the possible sources available to historians, and encouraged the increasing use of images as historical sources.⁵² The last several decades have seen the rise of a new mode of cultural history in which, as Peter Burke urges, the historian might think of 'cultures' in the plural; work with a considerably broadened and loosened definition of culture; focus more on the adaptation and the active reception of culture than on tradition; and give more weight to representation, invention and imagination as social forces.⁵³ A significant aspect of this type of cultural history has been the rise of interest in the methods of the Warburg school of image analysis and a concomitant cultural history that is both social and intellectual in character. Scribner's work on crude but powerful woodcut images in the German Reformation, on the polemics of visual print culture, and also the affective power of the visual in this culture, have been a key element of the reassessment of early modern printed images as historical sources.⁵⁴ More recent work on the nexus between visual culture, religious change and the natural world (both wondrous and everyday) during this period advance still more complex models of the visual as a significant historical force.⁵⁵

Some of the most innovative recent scholarship examines religious art, especially work produced during periods of religious conflict, and pays less attention to aesthetic qualities than to the work's devotional and affective power.⁵⁶ Images of monstrous births have a peculiar relationship to religious images, as their content is primarily secular. Yet they become so connected to the religious debates of the period that their relationship to religious visual culture is undeniable. Daston and Park have revised existing narratives about a 'progression' from religion to science by arguing for the co-existence of the two in relation to wonders. Scribner has taken issue with the traditional Weberian idea that the Reformation led to a 'disenchantment of the world', and as such was the harbinger of modern society.⁵⁷ In a similar vein, Peter Parshall has recently observed – in relation to the interpretation of natural events in an eschatological climate – that although there is a temptation to separate scientific interpretations from those based upon

a theological world view, in the final analysis 'the dictates of reason and manifest evidence of the irrational were in a constant state of tension.'⁵⁸

Not only images but also texts are crucial components of sixteenth-century publications on monstrous births. This book examines sources that were often consciously aimed at a variety of readers and viewers of varying levels of literacy and education. Formerly more sharply drawn distinctions between 'high' and 'low' culture tend to have been blurred in recent examples of cultural history.⁵⁹ Popular print culture is no longer necessarily regarded as low or unsophisticated culture.⁶⁰ Intersections between popular and elite or learned culture are underscored by the very broad cultural fascination exerted by monstrous births. Most of the sources examined here are of the sort that were not inventoried or otherwise recorded, and it is difficult to ascertain their reception. However, through close and contextualized examinations it is possible to see how they appropriated and responded to earlier publications, current events and important themes in sixteenth-century German lands. The great variety within the sources is the best testimony to the broad appeal and cultural significance of monstrous births.⁶¹

This book is a cultural history of monstrous births in print culture during a period of intense religious change and conflict. It is for the most part a chronological study, and structured as a series of analyses of different types of printed publications. These sources combine images and German texts, and were aimed at very wide audiences and markets.⁶² They range from the crudest to the most accomplished, and those with cursory descriptive texts as well as complex inter-textual polemics. Cumulatively, the book analyses the most significant types of representation to emerge between the late fifteenth and late sixteenth centuries. It examines single sheet and pamphlet publications by humanists, physicians, artists and Reformers; the emergence of illustrated books dealing with the theme of monstrous births and other wonders; a Counter-Reformation reworking of a theme more commonly associated with Protestants; and proliferating reports that emphasized the great and disturbing multitude of such births.

Above all, this book is concerned with the meanings that people of the time ascribed to monstrous births and how these meanings can be understood by examining printed sources. It places considerably more weight than any previous study on the positive interpretations given to monstrous births in the period immediately preceding the Reformation. It argues for a rise in negative and apocalyptic readings as the sixteenth century progressed, and proposes that this reached a peak just past the middle of the century following a decisive turning point during the Reformation, to be followed by publications that injected new life and new topical concerns into the theme of monstrous births. Chapter 1 examines a series of broadsheets published in the 1490s that combined poems by the humanist Sebastian Brant with crude but dynamic images of monstrous births. Brant's broadsheets demonstrate a relatively new interest – given impetus

by developments in printing technology – in individual, locally-born monstrous creatures; and how these creatures were quite distinct from the exotic monstrous races that were depicted in enduringly popular publications like John Mandeville's *Travels* and Konrad von Megenberg's *Buch der Natur*. Brant's humanist colleagues also contributed to this newly intensified interest in monstrous births, associated with the reign of Holy Roman Emperor Maximilian I (1493–1519).

Broadsheet representations that were aimed at increasingly wider audiences flourished from the turn of the sixteenth century. The imagery of monstrous births published in the early decades of the century forms the focus of Chapter 2, and especially prints created by leading artists including Albrecht Dürer and Hans Burgkmair the Elder. This was a famously fertile period in the history of German art, and especially graphic art. Nonetheless, images of monstrous births have been relatively neglected in studies of visual culture during this period. The chapter situates these images within contemporary artistic debates and trends, including Dürer's own writing. Through a focus on the representation of conjoined twins, the chapter demonstrates the great variety of approaches that were adopted by artists and authors in representing monstrous births. It draws out the complexity of these images, in which an urge towards naturalistic representation was combined with an evident deployment of artistic artifice and trends drawn from the broader visual culture of the period.

Monstrous births took on overwhelmingly negative overtones as they became part of Reformation polemic. They simultaneously became more directly and frequently linked with apocalyptic imagery. Chapter 3 looks at two of the most important examples of monstrous births from the first half of the sixteenth century: the Monk Calf, born in Freiberg in 1522, and the more visually bizarre Papal Ass, washed up on the banks of the Tiber in Rome in 1496. These creatures were polemically analysed in a 1523 pamphlet written by Martin Luther and Philipp Melanchthon, who allegorically interpreted the creatures' body parts as they lambasted the Catholic church. The bodies of the monsters became texts to be read and argumentatively decoded using highly visual language.

These singular monsters gave way to a great multitude as the century progressed. Chapter 4 examines the proliferation of books depicting monstrous births and other wonders that appeared in a wave in the 1550s. These books were produced with a variety of purposes in mind: as medical and midwifery manuals, as natural history studies, and above all as books of wonders. This chapter closely examines three early and richly illustrated examples by the Protestant authors Jakob Rueff, Job Fincel and Konrad Lycosthenes. While these books used broadsheets as sources, they moved away from the tendency within broadsheets to present monstrous births as individual and unique phenomena, and towards a focus on the cumulative effect of such events. In particular, Fincel and Lycosthenes developed a strongly Lutheran account of the history of the world.

This was one in which prodigies like monstrous births, dramatically multiplying in numbers in their own lifetimes, were signs of the coming Last Days.

German print publications on monstrous births are often characterized as almost exclusively produced by Protestants during this period. Chapter 5 examines a highly complex, understudied broadsheet that presents an unusual Catholic interpretation of the theme. Titled the *Ecclesia Militans*, and published in 1569, it combines a polemical poem by the Catholic exponent of Counter-Reformation polemic, Johann Nas, with an extraordinary image in which well-known monstrous births from throughout the century are jumbled together in an almost carnivalesque sequence which includes biblical figures overwhelmingly drawn from the apocalyptic Book of Revelation. This broadsheet draws together previously circulating ideas about monstrous births, tumultuous religious changes and apocalypticism, in a graphically dramatic format that appropriates and inverts themes previously developed by Lutheran authors. By this point of the century, monstrous births and the apocalyptic Book of Revelation were closely enmeshed, and overwhelmingly presented as such in German Reformation and Counter-Reformation print culture.

As second- and third-generation Protestantism became stressed and fractured during the later decades of the sixteenth century, new publications appeared that still interpreted monstrous births in apocalyptic terms. Many of these publications depicted events that took place in towns and cities under special strain: those in which Calvinism and Lutheranism struggled for ascendancy, for example, or from border towns in Inner Austria under threat during the Habsburg-Ottoman War of 1593–1606. Monstrous births still offered ways to make sense of a disordered world, and to continue religious debates. But by this stage monstrous births were increasingly more likely to be presented alongside other misbirths or wonders. A greater focus on children born with multiple heads, on multiple births, and on the capacity of some monstrous births to speak, led to new and often more complex narratives about and representations of monstrous births. The world of the wondrous had grown in iconographic variety, imaginative complexity and political, religious and social significance by the close of the sixteenth century to become a rich cultural resource. Print culture and religious turmoil had turned monstrous births into iconic figures in a world teeming with disturbing wondrous signs. The trajectory of that process is traced in the following pages.