

Oedipus Borealis: The Aberrant Body in Barbarian Europe

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Oedipus Borealis is a book in progress about physical and behavioral aberrancy in the surviving myth, legend, saga, and historiography of early Norse and Celtic societies. (1) These stories, preserved in medieval Irish and Icelandic manuscripts, indicate that the pagan societies of northwest Europe regularly constructed aberrancy as the mark of an outstanding person - a hero (or mother of a hero), a seer (or seeress), a god. (See the article by William Sayers in this issue for examples of marked Irish heroes.) This positive construction contrasts sharply with present-day Western views of aberrancy as stigma and of heroes as exemplary normates (to use Rosemarie Thomson's term for the non-disabled), views which, obviously, derive from sources other than the Celtic or Norse traditions. In *Oedipus Borealis*, I discuss one of these sources, *The Gospel According to Mark*, for comparison with the northern texts.

Mark's version of the ministry and death of Jesus was written in Syria sometime in the early 70s (that is, at least 40 years after Jesus' death) and is essentially a theological argument presented, in part, as a series of seventeen miracle stories, thirteen of which are "cures." Some of these stories came to Mark from various sources (the "Miracle Chain," the Elijah-Elisha cycle in First and Second Kings, etc.) and some he made up on his own to convey his theological points. My discussion of Mark follows a long first section on the Greek hero Oedipus, the legendary king of Thebes whose greatness was marked by his lameness and sexual aberrancy. The excerpt below comes after an overview of Mark's purposes, sources, and social assumptions and begins the discussion of the miracle anecdotes, specifically of Mark's deployment of ill and disabled people as "unclean" non-entities and his portrayal of Jesus as normate "physician."

Note: In keeping with the literary approach to my material, I discuss disabilities in terms appropriate to the milieu of the text, rather than in terms appropriate to present-day disability studies. Thus, while I do not call myself a "deaf and dumb paralytic," as Mark probably would have labeled me, or refer to colleagues with psychiatric disabilities as "demoniacs," I do refer to narrative figures by such terms when they are so called in the texts in which they appear.

In Capernaum, Jesus performs his first public act, preaching in the synagogue. Mark never gives us the text or even the gist of these sermons, as Luke and Matthew sometimes do, but whatever Jesus says astounds his audience. "Just then," as Mark tells it, "there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit, and he cried out, 'What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are, the Holy One of God.' But Jesus rebuked him

[the Greek verb means “reproached” with the stronger sense of “defeated”], saying, ‘Be silent, and come out of him!’ And the unclean spirit, convulsing him and crying with a loud voice, came out of him. They were all amazed. . . .” (1:23-27). This is the miracle story we refer to as the “Capernaum demoniac.”

It is impossible to say what pathology, in modern terms, “unclean spirit” might label. From the description of the man’s loitering in the synagogue and shouting out during the preaching, he appears to be chronically delusional, what would be called, in other traditional societies, a madman, and during the exorcism, he appears to experience a seizure. Thus, two kinds of behavioral aberrancy, both with medical etiologies, might be indicated. But Mark does not see the man in medical terms at all, of course. Instead, he constructs this man’s anomalous behavior in socio-religious terms as demonic possession, which makes him unfit to be a member of the community and renders him ritually unclean. Rather than attempt to diagnose the Capernaum demoniac, therefore, we need to see him in Mark’s terms. Premodern, premedical societies like first-century Palestine (and Sophocles’ fifth-century BCE Athens) address undesired anomaly or anomalous behavior largely by containment strategies in an attempt to prevent the carrier of the anomaly from contaminating the entire community with unwanted departures from the socially constructed norm. We have already seen one example of this approach in *Oedipus the King*, where Sophocles constructs the various plagues on Thebes as the result of contamination by a ritually unclean resident who must now be located and expelled from the city. Other societies use the category of uncleanness to isolate an aberrant individual socially rather than physically, to make him or her socially non-existent, and this is the case with the Capernaum demoniac who remains in Capernaum but who is socially untouchable. Constructing aberrancy as ritual uncleanness is thus primarily a device to maintain the desired social order by simply excluding the aberrant from the community of normates. This is the mechanism, ritual control of contamination, that Mary Douglas has written about in *Purity and Danger*.

Understanding Mark’s first episode therefore requires that we understand the Capernaum demoniac not as a schizophrenic epileptic but rather as a ritually unclean isolate from the community, living on its social margins and kept from wreaking disorder on the community by his status as a social non-entity. Still, the man does cause intermittent pockets of disorder, as here when he disrupts a sermon that has been amazing a crowd of normates, those with full-membership status in the community. Recalling that this miracle is one of the seven that is most likely Mark’s own invention and that Mark has deployed it to introduce Jesus’ miracle-working career, we note several key features: 1) the unclean spirit recognizes Jesus and his mission (“Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are . . .”), 2) Jesus eschews direct interaction with the possessed man, addressing instead the spirit that is possessing him (“Be silent and come out of him!”), and 3) the result of the

exorcism is the further amazement of the crowd. We will return to these and other aspects of this episode below as we see the motifs repeated in subsequent miracles and begin to speculate on their functions in Mark's overall narrative.

Having exorcised the unclean spirit, Jesus does not resume his sermon or lesson in the synagogue but rather repairs with his four followers to the relative privacy of Simon and Andrew's house. "Now Simon's mother-in-law was in bed with a fever, and they told him about her at once. He came and took her by the hand and lifted her up. Then the fever left her, and she began to serve them" (1:30-31). This second miracle seems at first reading to be of a different order or nature than the first one: the Capernaum demoniac case is an exorcism performed in public on a stigmatized, marginalized man, while the case of Simon's mother-in-law (often called "Peter's mother-in-law" in anticipation of Simon's name change in 3:16) is a laying-on of hands performed in private on an ordinary old woman. But the two episodes share a common underlying structure in several respects. For one thing, the demoniac and the mother-in-law share certain key features of the type-character Mark develops for Jesus to act on, and in fact together the madman and the old woman establish those features for all the ill and ill-behaving people subsequently normalized by Jesus. Those key features are, first, their near total blankness as people without names, faces, personal histories, or futures, and second, their roles in Mark's narrative as passive exhibits of Jesus' supernatural powers and proofs of his identities as the final successor of the miracle-working prophet Elijah, as the Beloved Son of God, and, ultimately, as the Messiah. These aberrant people on whom Jesus expends his miracle-working largesse and by means of whom he certifies his identity for the awe-struck crowds are never taken up as followers of any sort. In Mark, Jesus selects his followers from the ranks of the working poor (e.g., Simon and Andrew) and small-scale entrepreneurs (e.g., the sons of Zebedee). The formerly unclean, in contrast, are left where they were found, while the narrative, like the ever-present crowds, follows Jesus' constant movements.

A second common feature relates to the structure of the two episodes. Both the demoniac and the mother-in-law create social disorder in their respective gendered spheres, the male public world of the synagogue and the female private world of the home. By normalizing them, Jesus restores the desired social order in each sphere. The synagogue is the central communal institution in this Jewish society, the place where adult males who are full members of the community participate in communal study, meals, court and government proceedings, and so on, as well as religious services. The Capernaum demoniac, as an unclean non-person existing on the community's periphery, has not the right to participate in the communal discourse at the synagogue. By interrupting Jesus' sermon or lecture, he has created public disorder. Having been normalized by Jesus, he is again clean and can resume his position as a full member of the community. His contributions

to public discourse will no longer be illegitimate. Simon's house, on the other hand, is a private residence, the place where women who are fully functional according to this society's norms constitute the heart of the family microcosm, performing their own socially prescribed duties of producing food and clothing for the family. Simon's mother-in-law, sick in bed with a fever, is relegated to the periphery of this domestic miniature community and is not performing her socially required role. By failing to have a meal ready, she has created disorder in the private, domestic sphere. Having been normalized by Jesus, she can resume her position in the family and serve her son-in-law and his guests.

A third common element, also structural, is found in how these two aberrant people motivate Jesus to exert his miracle-working powers. Things do not go smoothly for Jesus on his return from the wilderness to initiate his ministry. After the very long walk to Capernaum, his maiden sermon is interrupted, just at the point when his audience begins to feel "astounded," by a heckler whose outburst, if not countered, would certainly have turned the crowd's awe to derision. Then, having retired to a private residence, he finds not only that no meal is ready but also that the cook is sick in bed. In each case, someone's aberrancy is creating a difficulty for Jesus, and, in each case, his normalization of that aberrancy removes the difficulty from his way. The demoniac stops heckling him and the mother-in-law starts serving him (in fact, the evening meal she serves him is the sign of her cure). Thus, with an astounding performance at the synagogue and a good meal at Simon's house, Jesus gets on with his traveling ministry in good order. There is certainly no sense in Mark that Jesus has set out intentionally to establish himself as a miracle physician, nor that he is moved to perform miracle cures as any sort of personal kindness to the demoniac or the mother-in-law. Rather it is as though Mark used these first two miracle stories to establish for his readers that Jesus was launched as a miracle worker almost by accident. As Mark would have known, a successful itinerant preacher has two basic needs: first, a series of audiences excited enough to gather but respectful enough to listen closely, and, second, a network of home bases to supply logistics support. The first requires charismatic crowd control skills and the second requires devoted women who hold the pantry keys. Mark's decision to start Jesus' Galilean ministry with the miracle cures of the Capernaum demoniac and Simon's mother-in-law thus establishes a practical basis for a successful ministry, with the cures as almost incidental to Jesus' mission except as they draw bigger crowds for his preaching. But problems are right around the corner and appear with the third figure to present himself for a miracle cure, the "leper."

Space limitations require me to break off here, but my discussion of Mark's portrayal of the disabled and their social roles continues through all thirteen of his miracle cures. The grossly negative model of the disabled that emerges over the thirteen cases is found to be a result of two basic assumptions about aberrance and

stigma and of Mark's purpose in writing. First, as is the dualistic tendency in all monotheistic cultures, the norm is constructed as God-given and universal, and deviations from it, concomitantly, the result of individual ungodly forces, either sin or demonic possession. Second, and consequently, stigmatization of the aberrant individual is an appropriate social response. Third, Mark's sole purpose in relating the miracle cures is to demonstrate Jesus' power over the forces of evil. Because of his purpose and unexamined assumptions about aberrance and stigma, Mark selects from among the stigmatized only the most extreme and pathetic cases: the demoniac who breaks the strongest chains to live naked among tombs and bruise himself with stones, the woman with the issue of blood who has been bleeding vaginally for an unbelievable twelve years, the Gentile woman who has to humiliate herself by accepting Jesus' ethnic slur of Gentiles as dogs, the sick little girl who turns out actually to be dead, and so on. The improbable extremity of the cases serves to test Jesus' powers to the maximum, while their pathos authorizes the individual's selection from the large number of the stigmatized for miraculous normalization. Mark's text thus establishes for Christianity at its very inception a model for supporting the discriminatory status quo and blaming the disabled for their anomalies. This is why, to take just one minor example, the official seal of Gallaudet University, the Mecca of Deaf culture, ironically features the patronizing goal of normalization in its inscription from Mark 7: "Ephphatha," "Be opened."

Notes

1. I expect to finish the book by the summer of 1998 and would be delighted to correspond in the meantime with anyone interested in my work. Until August 1998, I can be reached at PO Box 176, Willard, New York 14588.