An Impending Crisis?

In January 1569, Agnes Bowker, a serving woman of Market Harborough in Leicestershire, maintained that she had given birth to a cat. Local investigators appealed for advice to Lord Hastings, William Cecil, and Bishop Grindal in turn. Bowker’s story, notorious then, has been resurrected more recently by David Cressy, who sees in the attention it received evidence of the religious conflicts, political anxieties, and cultural tensions in the unsettled 1560s. The story became “a matter of public concern when people saw threatening portents in this apparent violation of nature, and when credulous Catholics gained ground by exploiting a dubious story.”¹ Both Protestants and Catholics found much meaning in such monsters; both sought to use them to their advantage. William Bullein’s *A Dialogue…Against the Fever Pestilence* made specific reference to Bowker’s cat, discrediting the tale, and deriding it as “a pleasant practice of papistry, to bring the people to new wonders.”² Bowker’s cat was one of a lengthy list of such portents in recent years. The 1560s saw a surge in publications on the deformities found in nature and their analogues in society more generally. Pamphlet writers glossed the births of “monstrous children” in Northamptonshire in 1565, Buckinghamshire and Surrey in 1566, and Kent in 1568 as signs of trouble within the realm. The Kent broadsheet included a graphic rendering of the deformed infant and bore the ominous subtitle “A Warning to England.” But a warning of what, specifically? “This monstrous shape to thee England, plain shows thy monstrous vice,” including blasphemy and a turning away from truth; the oppressions of gorging, greedy men; and the unruliness of those who “do seek not to be led, but for to lead amiss.”³ Such vices would surely be punished. Some people proved skeptical of such readings and viewed the monsters merely as entertaining diversions or frauds. But even Bullein, who

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dismissed Bowker’s cat as a contrivance manipulated by papists, allowed that real monsters existed, and that “after them do come great battles, pestilence, earthquakes, hunger and marvelous changes in commonwealths.”

Monstrous births plagued the 1560s, but so too did the elements themselves manifest God’s warnings. The providentially minded noted the fatal lightening storm that struck Covent Garden, widespread thunder and lightening storms that lasted eleven days without remit, and earthquakes in Lincolnshire and Northamptonshire in 1563. The following year, the Thames flooded, then froze, and in its thaw burst bridges and took lives. The next year saw unusual storms with hail and fire from heaven that destroyed hundreds of acres of crops. The sea, too, spewed forth its own providential signs. Fish up to twenty yards in length washed onto shore; in 1568, at Downham Bridge in Suffolk, some seventeen “monstrous fish” appeared. All this was done “by God, his mighty power and strength, to warn us of our sin.”4 After the 1569 rebellion, some saw the event as the fulfillment of such signs. William Woodwall realized in retrospect that the birth of a two-headed monster had signified the imminent rebellion of the two earls.5 Inspired by the recent rising, the author of A Marvelous Strange Deformed Swine (1570) thought that the unfortunate beast in question was a particular warning to beware those, like the recent rebels, “who meant the ruin of our realm, as Traitors to our Queen” (Illustration 1.1).6

Before the rebellion, no one knew quite what such signs portended, but they had plenty of reasons to be concerned for their future. In some respects, the 1560s were relatively quiet years; other than the disastrous Newhaven expedition early in the decade, no major wars – foreign or domestic – taxed the realm, and the widespread fears of impending turmoil upon Queen Elizabeth’s accession in 1558 had proven unfounded. Yet the final years of the decade saw a sense of crisis and a set of challenges that help explain both the rebellion and the responses to it. Disruptions in the cloth trade, poor harvests, and enclosures agitated some. A religious reformation that proceeded too slowly or too quickly, depending on one’s point of view, troubled others. With their Queen thus far unmarried and without an heir to ensure a stable succession, concerns for an uncertain future grew. In Ireland and Scotland, tensions threatened to redound upon English interests. Both witnessed rebellions, battles, and sieges that had repercussions for English affairs. The arrival in 1568 of Mary Stewart, the ousted Queen of Scots, proved especially troubling. No one knew quite what to expect of the Catholic powers of France and Spain, the former a long-time