

Michael Gaudio, *Engraving the Savage*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008.

In the final section of the Report, de Bry presents us with his collection of ancient Picts and Britons who “haue bin in times past as sauuage as those of Virginia.” The first of these savages, and the most fearsome of the group, is a Pict whose body is painted from shoulders to ankles with monstrous hybrids of all sorts.

Located on chest, belly, shoulders, and knees are grotesque faces whose purpose must have been recognized by early modern viewers as a means of magical protection against enemies. Harriot describes the Pict’s bodily ornamentation in the caption:

In tymes past the Pictes, habitans of one part of great Bretainne, which is nowe nammed England, wear sauuages, and did paint all their bodye after the maner followinge. . . . vppon their breast wear painted the head of som birde, ant about the pappes as yet waere beames of the sune, vppon the bellye sum feerefull and mon- streus face, spreedinge the beames veye fare vppon the thighes. Vppon the tow knees som faces of lion, and vppon their leggs as yt hath been shelles of fish. Vppon their Shoulders griffones heades, and then they hath serpents abowt their armes.

The description reads like a formula for designers of grotesques. In de Bry’s engraving, which is based on an even more striking watercolor by White, the savage body itself becomes a grotesque, as its limbs and appendages merge with and emerge from the fantastical creatures painted on its surface. The two heads on the Pict’s torso, which include an owl (traditionally a creature of ill omen) and a diabolical lion’s head, fulfill the function of the protective gorgon heads commonly found on both ancient and Renaissance armor. Indeed the Pict’s grotesque bodily ornament seems to be derived from fifteenth- and sixteenth-century designs for fanciful, theatrically inspired armor, like that which protects the body of Carlo Crivelli’s St. George (1472); and it is entirely possible that White based the design of his own figure on theatrical armor from the Elizabethan theater.

For the Pict, however, the absence of actual armor suggests that painted flesh has itself become a defensive shield, a form of protection, through the efficacy of the image alone, against the Pict’s enemies. But it is also essential to recognize that in leaving the printer’s ornament and entering the realm of representation the grotesque takes on an entirely new significance. The tail, for instance, that hangs from the backside of de Bry’s tattooed warrior, its point of attachment just hidden from view by the quiver, may exhibit some of the playfulness of the ornamental grotesque hybrid but its most basic function in the illustration is to identify this

figure with a primitive state that plays loosely with distinctions between the human and nonhuman. In this “true picture” of a Virginian, where we must have meaning, the subversiveness of grotesque ornament is contained—its potential threat to the perspective system is defeated—by means of its objectification. In this case and in the case of the decorated Pict, the grotesque is primitivized as a quality of the savage for the simple reason that the savage mind is itself supposed to be grotesque, that is to say, irrational and invested in the magical rather than in the representational power of the image. And so the savage paints his body with terrible faces, imagining that they help him in battle and protect him from his enemies. “When they go to battel,” Harriot writes of the Virginians, with whom we are expected to compare the grotesque Pict, “they peynt their bodyes in the most terrible manner that thei can devise.”

On the page opposite de Bry’s Pict, a grotesque printer’s ornament—a tailpiece consisting of a tiny, scowling gargoyle surrounded by delightful arabesques—stares us in the face. Through the Middle Ages, gargoyles quite openly served, like the faces on the Pict, as protective images. The juxtaposition of this ornamental gargoyle and the Pict’s bodily grotesques is therefore of some interest as an implicit commentary on the meaning (or meaninglessness) of grotesques, and it would seem to confirm Ernst Gombrich’s argument that medieval drolleries and Renaissance grotesques display the vestiges of the apotropaic image. We encounter a similar situation with another tailpiece, one that along with the gargoyle tailpiece is employed numerous times throughout the Report. At the center of this slightly larger ornament is a head surmounted by a crown of stylized palmettes, a common motif in Renaissance grotesques (de Bry often includes such heads in his grotesque designs) and one that was originally inspired by the apotropaic antefixes placed along the roofs of Etruscan temples. Incorporated into grotesques, such motifs preserve the memory of the image whose function is, in Gombrich’s phrase, one of “protective animation”; but of course there is little possibility of the gargoyle’s face being taken seriously by the viewer in the way the Pict seems to take his own grotesques seriously. Within the pictorial arts of a civilized and Protestant society, products of human fancy are not, or at least are not supposed to be, animated by supernatural forces. Grotesques thus migrate from their central role among savages and pagans into the domain of pure ornament, where they cannot by definition have “anie peculiar sence, or meaning.”

Still, the juxtaposition of these two pictorial instances of the grotesque, even if they occupy antithetical pictorial orders, should give us cause to wonder: How distant is the grotesque face that decorates the page from the grotesque face that protects the body? What would constitute the line between the containment of the magical image within the margins and the survival of pagan magic within the pages of a printed, Protestant text? This is an impossible line to draw

because containment and survival are two sides of the same coin: the printer's ornaments banish magic to the peripheries while at the same time serving as the living trace of that same magic. And so even as it is being civilized this grotesque remainder continues to mark the possibility of an alternative relation to the image. Indeed one can imagine without too much difficulty how protective animation might operate just below the surface of the Report. De Bry's tailpiece, after all, performs a function not unlike the grotesques of the Pict, insofar as de Bry finds himself in a publishing situation where he is in need of his own protective devices. As we saw in the previous chapter, de Bry attempts to shield himself from counterfeiters with the apotropaic claim that "dyuers secret marks lye hiddin in my pictures, which wil breede Confusion vnless they bee well obserued." The statement grows out of a publisher's anxiety about protecting his investment after it is released to a public over which he has no control. The condition I mentioned earlier—that of publishing for an open market in which meaning itself was largely a production of the reader—raised fundamental difficulties for printers, publishers, and authors who wished to maintain authority over their texts and images. It is not, therefore, entirely unreasonable to think of a printer's ornament, a mark of identity and even ownership,⁸⁰ as an image carrying the memory of a magical function, a function that a publisher could not and perhaps would not want to make so fully other that its apotropaic power was no longer accessible.