

The Confessions of Brother Bede

Confession 1: The Interesting Anatomy of Brother Absalom

Perhaps I would never have left my beloved monastery if I hadn't noticed my Brother Absalom's tiny feet. Every morning at three o'clock, when the bell rang for the service of Matins, I would watch them emerge from under Brother Absalom's blanket. Through half opened eyes I would imagine they were the feet of a beautiful young woman. Unbecoming thoughts would visit me and guilt would well up within me. I am not sure whether I was more relieved or disappointed when they were followed out of the blanket by the cumbersome bulk of Brother Absalom.

He was the largest monk at our Monastery by some distance. He towered over the rest of us in his over-sized cassock, made from two ordinary ones bound together with string. On our way to worship Prime in the early morning light his shadow stretched the length of the cloister, all the way from the door of our dormitory to the steps of our beloved church. My own shadow did not reach half that distance, although I was probably one of the smaller adult members.

Despite his size, I doubted whether a more devout or gentler man ever graced this Earth. He hardly uttered a word to anyone, though he wasn't under an oath of silence. He held his body with touching meekness, his shoulders hunched, his head turned down towards the ground. It was as if he carried some great burden on his shoulders, though I could not imagine him committing any kind of sin.

Once, when I roused him from prayer by laying hand on his shoulder, I gave him such a fright that he leapt to his feet with alarm. My Brother's sudden and unexpected movement knocked me half the width of the nave, into a font of holy water. I would have liked to have been angry with him but he looked very sorry.

He scooped me off the floor into his arms and carried me to the all the way to the infirmary. This was some distance away, beyond the refectory, the pig pens and the water mill. He did not stop until we reached the secluded corner where the sick and elderly were kept, hidden away they would not disturb the smooth running of our establishment or spread any disease. The whole way he mumbled a continuous apology, his words tumbling over one another. As he spoke, I kept meaning to ask him my question. Frustratingly, each time that I was about to come out with it, I would hold back, thinking that perhaps there was a better way to phrase it, or that this wasn't the right time ask. I caught the words a fraction before they left my mouth, and

produced a noise that must have sounded like feeble whimpering. It made Brother Absalom hurry towards the infirmary with ever greater haste, and before I had a chance to ask, I found myself laid in a straw bed and being tended by several of the younger novices.

For some months I had been meaning to ask Brother Absalom my question. Unfortunately, as I will explain, it was of a delicate nature. It would not have been easy to approach a good friend with such a query; let alone a lonely soul who weighed at least two of me. I worried that to some ears my question might sound crude. I worried it might sound like the kind of speculation indulged in by unholy, the foolish or the drunk, though nothing could have been further from the truth.

To keep myself occupied during my days at the Monastery, I had worked on some studies of a scientific nature. This was not the science of alchemy, astronomy or any other questionable areas of interest. It concerned the order of nature and the essence of God's holy form in the shape of man. As you will no doubt understand this was a study of great interest to a devout man like myself. If man was created in the image of man, then surely the more we understand ourselves the more we understand the mind of God.

The Aedificium of our monastery boasted one of the largest collections of books in the Christian world. There were books concerning every subject imaginable, from devout pursuits to many other fields besides. Some of these books were controversial, and some were a direct contradiction to the word of our Lord. Nonetheless, it was our Abbot's opinion that we must know the Devil, as well as the Lord, in order to distinguish between the two. Even less senior monks such as myself were allowed access to some interesting works. Books that other monks at other lesser monasteries would not even know existed. If the theories in some of the books were untrue, and no doubt inspired by the Devil, an attentive scholar could still gather some fascinating insights.

Back then I had become interested in one particular theory. It was one I had formulated myself from various sources. Although it was based on the teachings of the new science, it was also abundant in the glory of our Lord – Praise be His magnificence.

At that time I believed that you could judge the character of a man by measurement of his physical characteristics. I had always found it hard to read other men, to know their motivations and intentions. I felt sure that this was the reason that

I had failed to gain any kind of position in the monastery, not even a junior one. I hoped that if proved true my theory would help me to know and understand my Brothers better. I would know what to say and what to do to improve my image in the eyes of my betters and so rise up the ranks to the greater glory of our Lord.

For example, it was my belief that of the many things you can tell about a man from appearance alone, one was his intelligence. By this I didn't mean how much he knew of the scriptures, or the other teachings of our Lord. I meant what you could tell about his cunning and his ability to solve the unpredictable problems that confront us every day. In studying pictures of well-known geniuses and fools, I calculated that the main way you could determine this was by careful measurement of the subject's ears or nose. A smaller set of ears and nose indicated a limited intellect, and little capacity for deeper thinking, whilst larger sets of these two organs indicated a person of greater intelligence and deeper understanding.

Safe to say, although it renders me unattractive, I have large ears and the most wondrously over-sized beak of a nose in the whole of Christendom. You must understand that, rather than making me feel me superior to my Brothers, this blessing made me more convinced of the accuracy of my work, its importance to the advancement of mankind, and of course, to the glory of our Lord.

This example brings me to another thing I thought you could tell about a man by his physical attributes alone. Using my methods I thought it possible to gauge his temperament; his level of physical and moral aggression. To me this was the most important aspect of a persons' personality of all. If knew this you could work out the best way to make the right impression, and in time become a good friend. This brings me closer to my interest in the size of Brother Absalom's feet, which shall all be explained in due course. For now I will say that the organ I thought determined the temperament of man was none other than his penis.

Of course it is unusual to see a man's penis before you understand his personality and temperament. At first I feared this made my theory impractical, until I thought of a solution – Praise be to my large ears and my magnificent nose.

One day while looking for something to read in the Aedificium, I found an interesting work. It was a personal notebook that recorded the observations of the Greek natural scientist Galen. Born over one thousand years ago, a short time after the birth of our Christ, he travelled across many distant lands. By careful study of the strange and magnificent creatures he saw, Galen made some interesting observations

about the anatomy of all living creatures. One particular entry told how he could predict the size of a bird's beak by the length of its clawed feet, no matter the size of the rest of the bird. This led me to wonder if you make a similar judgement regarding the dimensions of man. I wondered whether you could tell the length of a man's penis by the size of his feet. If you could it would mean that I would be able determine his temperament without getting more familiar than is proper and correct for a man of my calling.

If you are larger of ear, or more magnificent of nose, you will already understand my interest in my Brother Absalom. You will know why I thought him such an ideal case study for my theory. Despite his large proportions, I predicted he would have the humblest of penises. I am only a little ashamed to admit that I imagined it to be no more than a small bean in a thick leathery sack; shrivelled and very tiny.

Other books by authors such as Aristotle and Friar Roger Bacon had taught me that scientific study requires proof as well as faith. For this reason I knew I must find a way to discover if my theory was true, before I put it into everyday use.

My first thought was to ask Brother Absalom his dimensions. But as I had discovered when he rushed me to the infirmary, this was more difficult than I had hoped. Each time I thought of a way to ask the question it sounded too direct and likely to offend, or too obscure and likely to cause confusion. The longer I left this question hanging, unanswered, the more I became fixated by it. I would rehearse lines in my head, all the time wondering at the precise length and nature of my Brother Absalom's manhood. My most recent plan had been to wait until our communal bath that takes place every March. This meant a wait of some months, and my disappointment when Brother Absalom failed to appear put me in a bad mood for weeks afterwards.

This must sound an inappropriate pastime for a man of God, but the goals of my inquiry related to the understanding of the creations of our Lord. And it is also true that monastic life can sometimes be light in interesting diversions, other than those of a religious nature of course. It is only to be expected that the mind will wander off the course of things from time to time. I say this not to excuse what followed, or what came after that, but merely in the hope that you will look on me kindly as you hear my tale.

I decided the only way to discover the extent of my Brother's manhood was to

see for myself in secret. Although a shy, solitary man, my Brother Absalom did have one strange habit that the Abbot let him indulge in. It was known by the lowliest novice that every day after Matins he would go to the room below the bell tower and flail himself. As we filed out of the church in silence we all heard the whip coming down against his exposed flesh, though Brother Absalom never made a sound. Many believed that he did this to atone for sins committed before he entered our holy sanctum some three years before. In the hidden alcoves of the cloister some said his body was covered in scars, that he had survived some great battle against the forces of the heathen kings. They said he was a member of the Knights Templar, the order of holy warrior monks that had all been imprisoned for heresy, an event that sent shockwaves through the Christian world. At the time I thought these rumours nothing more than idle gossip, and they were of little interest to me. What interested me was that he did this flailing naked, while the bells rang out in the tower above him.

The top of the room in which he performed his flagellation had, at its very summit, a small hole. The purpose of this hole was to allow the pull cords for the bells to travel downwards. I had only seen it once but I thought it was just large enough for a small man like myself to fit through. My plan was to suspend myself by one of these cords, descend into the chamber for a moment, observe the article of my interest, and then disappear back the way I had come. With luck Brother Absalom would not notice my brief appearance.

The most difficult part of my plan was to find a reason to be in the bell tower after the ceremony of Matins had finished. I was not a senior monk and if caught wandering I would be questioned. I have always found it difficult to lie and I knew I would get myself into trouble if I told the truth. Certain things are always cause for concern amongst monastery, and admitting that you wanted to see a Brother's penis would not be looked upon kindly, no matter the motive. It took me some days before I devised a strategy to prevent being caught.

As a monk it is only customary to give regular confession, as my writing of this tome bears witness. Back at the monastery we were able to report our sins at any time of the day. At this an early hour in the morning all the senior monks would be busy with their preparations for the day ahead. It was my hope that my confessor would be none other than Brother Matthew.

Brother Matthew was a kindly and devout man but was the oldest of all those living in our community. When I'd had confessions with him before he had fallen

asleep moments after I'd begun. My plan was to sneak out of the wooden confession chamber whilst the old man slept. With the Bell Tower close by, I would be back before too long and my absence would not be noticed. I could then awake my Brother with a loud cough, as had become the custom when Brother Matthew heard your confession, and carry on my day as if it was the same as every other.

On the fateful morning of my plan I thought it sensible to calm my nerves with some herbs from our brother herbalist. I had been given them before when Brother Absalom had sent me tumbling into the font of holy water. In the infirmary they had reduced my pain and put me in a state of great calm, but as I made my way towards the church I found the herb had an unusual effect on me.

With the wind causing my cassock to snap back and forth, I became convinced that something skittered about me. All kinds of uncertainties flooded my mind and I am ashamed to admit that I became afraid. The moaning of the wind across the eaves of the church sounded like a chorus of mournful voices that whispered into my ear. The voices told to me to do the strangest of things that I won't mention here.

The relief that I felt when I entered the light and sanctity of our church was immeasurable and once the ceremony had begun I felt much better. I sung with greater heart than I would normally have done, especially at that hour in the morning. Although I caught bemused glances from my Brothers around me, I didn't care so great was my sudden elation. During our Abbot's sermon I became captivated by the stained glass windows. I discovered strange, beguiling patterns of light that had not struck me before. Places where different colours met and something wonderful danced and shimmered. Something that hinted at deeper and more profound meanings than the well know bible scenes the stained glass depicted. All the while the Abbots voice filled the cavernous space of the church with a multitude of tiny but perfect echoes. In my ecstatic state I couldn't understand a single word he said, but somehow, as if through divine inspiration, I felt I had complete understanding of their meaning.

In fine spirits after the ceremony, I put into action the first part of my plan. It felt as if nothing could possibly go wrong. Inside the cramped space of the confession box I saw the long, grey strands of Brother Matthew's beard nudging through the grill towards me. Pleased to see him there I pulled at his beard to get his attention.

"Wake up Brother Matthew," I said, "I have some wonderful confessions to make."

Startled, Brother Matthews attempted to stand up, banged his head on the ceiling, and settled back down muttering to himself.

I started to say whatever happened into my head. For what felt like a long time I talked about my favourite meals served in the refectory. Even Brother Matthews must have wondered what the point of my ramblings was, because he cleared his throat at regular intervals, and I could feel him eying me suspiciously through the grill.

Under pressure to come up with a confession of some sort, I invented a story that I had coveted another brother's portion of raw beans at Vespers. To follow this I confessed that I felt jealous of Brother Absalom's wooden bunk of as it looked longer and wider than my own. I even said that it looked to be made from softer wood and so, relatively speaking, must be been that bit more comfortable.

The more I spoke the more felt detached from my own words. It was as if I was able to sit back and listen to myself talk, similar to what you are doing now as you read my confession. Alongside my own voice I heard a background hum that I had not noticed before, a gentle but dreamlike roar. The sound grew in volume and intensity until it sounded like a mighty storm in the sky above me. I pictured an angry torrent of rain that lashed down onto our small enclosure. As we sat there, myself and Brother Matthew in our tiny little box, truly biblical volumes of water fell from the sky. The rain fell onto the roof of confession box itself, rather than onto the roof of the church, which even at the time seemed odd. I imagined this downpour had lasted for some days, and I thought that it had been raining so long that all the surrounding rivers and lakes burst their banks and merged with the seas at the edges of the land. I saw myself and Brother Matthew set afloat in the confession box, the two of us drifting atop a mighty ocean that covered the whole of the Earth.

As we bobbed along I heard a different sound; a deep, sonorous lowing that vibrated our entire craft with its power. In the same way that things are known in a dream, I knew this to be the song of a whale. An immense a fish a hundred times the size of a man, one that lives in the oceans according to the books I had read in the Aedificium. I was so enchanted by the fathomless sound of this creature, I decided to step outside our craft to see it for myself beneath the waves of the endless ocean.

When I opened my eyes I found myself back in the confessional box in the corner of the nave. Brother Matthew's snores sent tremors through our enclosure and the church bells rang loudly above our heads. Momentarily confused, I remembered

my plan and stumbled out of the confession box, dismissing the idea that the world was drowned in water.

With the church bells ringing above me, I climbed the narrow stairs of the bell tower into the room above Brother Absalom. I had been one of the bell pullers myself in the past, and the peal being played was one I knew well. One of the slack bell cords would be pulled again before too long, and I attached the rope to my ankle and waited. As hoped I soon rose into the air, albeit slowly and accompanied by laboured breathing and cries of alarm. I reached the top of my climb and then plummeted through the narrow opening to the darkened chamber below.

It took me several moments to get my bearings and discover the whereabouts of Brother Absalom. When I did I got a sizable shock. I blush to tell it now, but Brother Absalom possessed the largest penis imaginable. Even allowing for his great size, it was truly enormous. I feared that if he waded through a patch of stinging weed in a loose cassock he would render himself insensible with the stings received. It was of such a staggering girth and length that, as I rose back up into the chamber above, I felt the need to cross myself. Unfortunately this extended the width of my body and I came into crashing and painful contact with the narrow hole in the ceiling. Startled, and with Brother Absalom looking mournfully up at me, I began to say random things, the herbs no doubt taking their part in what I said.

“It raining so hard in the nave it's like the end of the world,” I said.

Slowly descending, I added, “Fried herrings for supper are without doubt my favourite meal.”

I came to a stop directly in front of a bemused and fearful looking Brother Absalom. In the time it took to see that my naked Brother had stopped his flailing twig above me, my cassock fell down over my head and revealed my own genitals. When the Abbot walked in the incident turned from embarrassment to disaster. What made the whole thing truly unfortunate was that our wise leader was showing a small group of novice candidates around the monastery. They tramped in after him to find me and Brother Absalom engaged in something that must have looked quite unnatural. With my cassock over my head, unaware of the recent arrivals, I continued to talk. I thought the shrill screaming came from Brother Absalom, and not some shocked boys from the local town.

I honestly hoped to calm Brother Absalom when I said, “You have a marvellous cock my good Brother, proof of the wonderment of our Lord in Heaven, I

have no doubt.”

To his credit the Abbot did not expel me from the monastery. After a lengthy lecture on the sin of deviancy and my suitability to the calling, he offered me a position amongst the lay brothers of our monastery. He knew that my mother had passed away during my birth, and that my Father had disappeared shortly after I joined. He knew I had nowhere else to go. As a lay brother I would tend the fields, clean and tidy, do the laundry, look after the sheep and pigs in the monastery grounds. I would sit at the back of the church and not be allowed to speak to the choir brothers unless spoken to first. After many years’ service, the Abbot told me, I would be able get a job in the warmth of the kitchens.

By then my back would be bent out of shape from hard labour, and my hands would be rough like ancient tree bark. I would not be able to attend the meetings in the choir room, or listen to the thoughts and experiences of monks that travelled from the great cities of the world to visit us. Worst of all I would not be allowed into the Aedificium. I would never read again.

I told the Abbot that I understood that deviances must be stamped out in case they spread. I thanked him for his kindness and his understanding. With my voice wavering I told him that I could not accept his offer, and that I had no option but to leave.

For the rest of the day I hid and the next morning I left without saying goodbye. The event would have become common knowledge and I could not bear to look my Brothers in the eye again. My heart sank with every step, and I told myself that I would be able to explore the world and refine my theories. Hadn’t I wondered about the world beyond the walls of our monastery, and here was my chance to explore it at will. I might even investigate the disappearance of my Father all those years ago, and who knows where my path might lead.