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Debra Higgs Strickland, *Saracens, Demons, and Jews: Making Monsters in Medieval Art*. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2003. 336 pp. Color plates, black and white illustrations, notes, bibliography, and index. \$60.00 U.S., £39.95 U.K. (cl). ISBN 0-691-05719-2.

Review by Robert Mills, King's College London.

To date, Debra Higgs Strickland (previously publishing under the name of Debra Hassig) has been best known for her careful analyses of illustrated bestiary manuscripts from France and England.[1] In the present volume she continues to draw on her expertise in thirteenth-century manuscript studies, while also establishing herself as a gifted and inventive cultural historian. Strickland's subject matter is what she terms the "pictorial code of rejection" deployed by artists in the later Middle Ages to depict social others; more particularly, she focuses on the ways in which, during the era of the crusades, representations of monsters and demons informed--and crucially blurred into--images of non-Christian groups, such as Ethiopians, Jews, Muslims, and Mongols. Given the topic's unwieldy potential, Strickland feels the need to impose "serious limits" on her material (p. 9). She chooses to concentrate primarily on French and English works of art and literature, explaining that in countries such as Spain and Italy fewer demeaning images have survived because Jewish-Christian tensions were less pronounced. This points to what is perhaps Strickland's overriding focus in the study, namely the production of anti-Jewish images in regions where actual Jewish communities were discredited, abused, persecuted, and eventually expelled.

Strickland works in the shadows of several other scholars who have explored the topic of pejorative representation in recent years--these are debts that she is quick to acknowledge. Ruth Mellinkoff's *Outcasts*, a seminal survey of signs of otherness in the art of medieval northern Europe, is credited as being an especially significant precursor to and indeed foundation for the present analysis.[2] At the same time, given the comparative interest in other areas of cultural production such as theology, literature, and drama, Strickland envisages her own book as having wider implications too, as an "art historical corroboration and extension" of claims made in Edward Said's *Orientalism* (p. 20).

After a short introductory preface outlining the author's methodological and practical considerations, the book opens with a survey of the ideological underpinnings to the medieval iconography of rejection. Strickland contends, in chapter one, that ancient Greek and Roman theories of climate, medicine, astrology, and physiognomy combined to produce the belief that one's environment, bodily form, and moral well-being were intimately and intricately related; these theories, in turn, are deemed to have provided the basic template for later Christian beliefs about the links between outer appearance and inner character. One manifestation of this association is the ideal western European human type--Strickland cites here a striking image from a fifteenth-century French copy of a well-known encyclopedia, stunningly reproduced as one of the book's fifteen color plates, which depicts the figure of *Health Man* as predictably white-skinned, blond, well-proportioned, and male. The other extreme is the monster, an anti-ideal constructed as a foil to the normative medieval Christian that provided, says Strickland, one of the intellectual frameworks within which living outcast groups could be legitimately dehumanized and, in the case of Jews, physically harmed. The chapter ends, as such, with a consideration of the Monstrous Races in medieval culture and argues that these elusive, imaginary figures "conveyed Christian ideas about evil that also informed representations of the living enemies of Christendom" (p. 59).

Chapter two continues apace with an account of another figure used to conceptualize notions of evil in medieval Christian culture: the dark, disturbing, and consummately hybrid demon. Demons were not only embodiments of evil, however; they were also--and here Strickland deploys terminology that, in the light of recent events, possesses a peculiarly contemporary resonance--"terrorists" (p. 67). What the author means here is that artists depicted demons as tormentors who lured medieval Christians into hell and, when they got there, subjected them to horrific tortures. In a move that mirrors the previous chapter's analysis of the Monstrous Races, the author insists that medieval demonology provided a resource and conceptual framework for the depiction of other types of enemies, especially

Jews and black Africans, who were often cast similarly, in the role of torturers or terrifying savages; Ethiopians especially were imagined as demonic figures, based primarily on their associations with blackness.

Chapter three is the book's thematic centerpiece, comprising as it does an account of the appearance of Jews in the medieval Christian imaginary. The question of how Christians imagined Jews in medieval art and literature has, of course, been addressed in numerous other studies (by Andrew Gow, Ruth Mellinkoff, and Miri Rubin, to name just a handful). Strickland's particular contribution to this dynamic body of scholarship is to consider the links between depictions of monsters and Jews. The Jew is a figure characterized by Strickland as "a kind of *ur-monster*, an imaginary and ideological complex of all that medieval Christians found abhorrent" (p. 111). It is not clear how useful this recourse to a vocabulary of origins is: the idea that portraits of Jews provided some kind of ultimate or original symbolic resource for representations of other outcasts needs substantiating and, indeed, produces numerous interpretative problems.

For instance, a folio from the thirteenth-century Westminster Abbey Bestiary (reproduced on the front cover) depicts a three-faced giant, a pygmy, a one-legged creature known as a Sciopod, and a group of cave-dwelling Bragmanni. Strickland suggests that the giant's bright orange Phrygian hat, like that of the Sciopod, "identifies him as a Jew" and as such is a prime example of the propensity for "blurring the line between Monstrous Races imaginary and living" (p. 134). While the point about representational blurring is perfectly valid, I wonder whether the certainty with which the author identifies monsters in the folio as Jews risks simultaneously masking some of the image's complexity. After all, several of the figures raise their hands in gestures of pointing: this suggests that a signifier like, say, the Phrygian cap, which was traditionally used by Christian artists to communicate the opprobrium of Jewish identity, might also be associated, through its recontextualization in the depiction of Monstrous Races, with a different conception of monstrosity--one emphasizing the monster as a figure of wonder, portentous of divine existence or spiritual truths. This more "positive" understanding of monstrosity is explored at greater length in Strickland's concluding chapter, and I simply wonder whether it could also provide a more sophisticated interpretative model for some of the images discussed earlier in the book.

In addition, the chapter asks us to recognize imagery of this sort as part of a "powerful propaganda" campaign on the part of the church--a campaign that had injurious consequences for the actual Jewish populace living in regions where these depictions were created and circulated (p. 105). This is an attractive and indeed tempting formulation, but I wonder whether Strickland's notion of a campaigning ethos here might also be reframed, more subtly, as a question about how, in specific locations and timeframes, the process of "propagandizing" worked. How exactly were individual artists and patrons enlisted in this program of ideological indoctrination? Did the prejudicial endeavors of religious leaders translate directly and unproblematically into a visual "language" of rejection? Was the code that Strickland so deftly unravels always perfectly understood or supported by individual medieval commissioners, makers, and beholders? These are questions that are hard--sometimes even well nigh impossible--to answer with any certainty. In posing them, I do not wish to knock the life out of Strickland's broad comparisons and energetic observations: this book's merit is precisely that it opens up the field to further, more localized investigations.

This chapter's most successful section is also arguably its most original contribution: a brief discussion of iconography that expressed not the hope that Jews might convert to Christianity but the fear that Christians might convert to Judaism. The pair of images Strickland interprets in this light are powerful illustrations of the author's earlier claim that, while Christian portraits of Jews tell us next to nothing about medieval Jews, "they reveal a great deal about medieval Christians" (p. 96). As highly educated critics of Christian belief, Jews were perceived as posing an intellectual as well as social threat to the integrity of medieval Christianity, and these images seem designed to further substantiate that perception.

Strickland next turns to how pejorative renderings of Jews coincided with an increased interest in representing non-Christian enemies from further afield, particularly Saracens and Mongols, during the period of the Crusades. This fourth chapter reproduces some extraordinary visual material in this context--a scribal doodle representing Mohammed as a monstrous, fishy hybrid in a twelfth-century French copy of *De generatione Machumet* is especially striking, adding weight to the book's contention that the medieval pictorial code of rejection literally made monsters of its subjects. Also noteworthy is the observation that Muslim descriptions of Tartar physiognomy occasionally rivaled those of Christians in terms of negative sentiment.

The penultimate chapter explores how Jews, Muslims, Ethiopians, and monsters were integrated into Christian eschatological and apocalyptic visions and were shown to be in collusion with the AntiChrist. Strickland suggests that the projected defeat of these groups at the end of the time served an ideological purpose in the here and now: to convince readers and viewers of the supreme strength of the church.

Chapter six, the last, addresses a question that possibly would have been better posed at the outset: that is to say, "what is a monster?" Here the author notes how the pictorial code of rejection was not applied to certain social groups, monks for example, who otherwise shared characteristics with communities denigrated as "monstrous": strange dress and language, domestic segregation, and so forth. So why in these circumstances were no pejorative features rendered? And how was it that certain monstrous figurations--for instance, images of the Trinity as a three-headed being--could be considered perfectly legitimate in Christian contexts, at least until they came to be condemned by certain medieval theologians? "Context is the key," announces Strickland, an insight that leads her to demand an "adjusted definition" of monstrosity--not as a metaphor for unacceptability as she had previously assumed, but as a term accommodating a more "positive" set of meanings too (p. 243). She draws here on David Williams's account of the medieval interest in monstrosity as a "deformed discourse," a method of grasping the Divine through the representation of its conceptual opposite.[3] As I have already implied, this more capacious definition of monstrosity may well produce alternative interpretations of images discussed elsewhere in the book, not least that reproduced on the dust jacket. It is therefore a pity that the issue of "what makes a monster" was not raised more regularly and explicitly throughout.

That I would like to reread the book with a view to retroactively "adjusting" some of its explanations is, nonetheless, an index of just how rich and suggestive Strickland's examples and analyses are. This is a book that will stimulate discussion and debate in a variety of fields. Exceptionally well documented, it is also generously illustrated, which makes it an outstanding visual resource. Above all, it reminds us of the power of images to demarcate, categorize, violate, and offend--and of the capacity for monsters to impact on people's lives in ways that extend well beyond their perceived role as fantastic and imaginary beings.

NOTES

[1] Debra Hassig, *Medieval Bestiaries: Text, Image, Ideology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995); Debra Hassig, ed., *The Mark of the Beast: The Medieval Bestiary in Art, Life, and Literature* (New York: Garland, 1999).

[2] Ruth Mellinkoff, *Outcasts: Signs of Otherness in Northern European Art of the Later Middle Ages*, 2 vols (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1993); see also Ruth Mellinkoff, *The Mark of Cain* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1981).

[3] David Williams, *Deformed Discourse: The Function of the Monster in Mediaeval Thought and Literature* (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 1996).

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