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Robert Mills, *Suspended Animation: Pain, Pleasure and Punishment in Medieval Culture*. London: Reaktion Books, 2005. 248 pp. 10 color plates, 90 halftones, notes, bibliography, and index. \$29.99 U.S. (cl). ISBN 1861892608.

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Pain and pleasure intertwine in unpredictable relations that cut across sex and gender, word and image, fact and fiction, past and future, history and historicism. When scholars study pain and pleasure their disciplinary categories begin to unravel (what counts as literary studies, queer studies, history, art history); nor are the spectral paths traced by the ghosts of unfinished attachments to the past easy to map with conventional historical periodization.[1] In *Suspended Animation: Pain, Pleasure and Punishment in Medieval Culture*, Robert Mills draws on diverse evidence ranging from late medieval poetry, law, drama, with a special emphasis on religious and civic art, in order to show how pain and pleasure are closely bound in the discourse and fantasy of spectacular justice in the Middle Ages. He calls the knot of pain and pleasure the “medieval penal imaginary” (p. 16). The pioneering work of L. O. Aranye Fradenburg on sacrifice and the pains and pleasure of courtly love profoundly influences his project. [2]

Mills engages in lively queer critique of the work of Michel Foucault. Rather than imagining a history of sexuality temporally divided between a premodern world of sodomitical acts and a modern world of normative heterosexuality, or a history of punishment split between spectacular medieval tortures and modern panoptical disciplinary regimes (as Foucault did), queer scholars are imagining, instead, indeterminate and plural co-existences of sexual and penal imaginaries.[3] The author uses a variety of metaphors for imagining such co-existence. He draws upon Carolyn Dinshaw’s “touch across time” and his own notion of suspension inspired by the hanged body which constitutes the book’s central image.[4] He argues along with Dinshaw, Fradenburg, Freccero, and Lochrie for the queer traces of pleasure in painful physical punishments that resist the impulse to categorize.

Mills relies mostly on images to make his argument and the bulk of his visual evidence comes from Northern European contexts (especially the Netherlands and Germany) and dates predominantly from the fifteenth century. The images encompass different media ranging from large painted altarpieces (emergent in Northern Europe from the 1330s), painted programs decorating town halls, manuscript illustrations, devotional woodcuts (their dissemination starts in the 1440s), illustration in early printed books, and sculpture, especially wood sculpture. He opens his argument with an investigation of the suspended body of judicial hanging and its counterpart in the upside-down hanging characteristic of the defamatory portrait. He is interested in how the suspension of the criminal between life and death provides the constitutive space for viewing punishment (then and now). He compares and contrasts depictions of juridical hanging with upside-down hanging in defamatory portraits and uses the comments of Giorgio Vasari (1511-1574) made in his *Lives of the Painters* (c. 1550)—a hagiography written in a secular register—to address the aestheticization that he thinks is at stake in later defamatory portraits. I shall return to Mill’s use of aestheticization, as it constitutes, I think, the political unconscious of the book.

In chapter two, Mills analyzes the striking and much-discussed depiction of the flaying of the corrupt judge Cambyses painted in 1498 by Gérard David for the adornment of the Bruges Town Hall. To heighten his arguments regarding its purported ideologies of aestheticization, he compares and contrasts it with an uncanny sixteenth-century “copy” that meticulously re-presents David’s study as

the *Martyrdom of Saint Bartholomew*, an early-Christian martyr condemned to death by flaying. The forensic-like mirroring of these two images deserves more careful attention, since it raises questions about the time and timing of artifacts and the material violence at stake in fabricating so-called “art” images that supersedes the late medieval religious “icon” during the sixteenth-century. The violence of that contest, I suggest, is deeply intertwined with the medieval penal imaginary and how it might or might not be transformed through the making and unmaking of artifacts. Mills could deepen his analysis of how medieval images are constitutive of the medieval penal imaginary by considering these broad typological questions more fully.

Chapter three focuses on depictions of the punishment of male sodomites in Hell. The visual catalog of such tortures emerges in Italian wall-paintings of the early-fourteenth century. Mills makes the intriguing argument that the sodomizing punishments inflicted on sodomites for eternity transforms what was a temporal act into a perpetual identity, thus blurring distinctions between acts and identities and the spaces in which they are imagined.

The extravagantly distended ostentations of the intimate corporeal tortures of early Christian female martyrs, one of the most popular motifs of late medieval religious art, is the subject of chapter four. Mills addresses the paradoxical question of violence, religious pornography, and possibilities for other forms of pleasurable identification that such depictions trouble. In chapter five he turns to late medieval representations of male martyrdom in order to tease out how masochism “embedded in motifs of fantasy, suspension and exhibitionism, recodes the body-in-pain as a site of agency and sexual liberation...[i]n the world of the martyr, *to be penetrated is not to abdicate power*” (p. 171). In the final chapter Mills addresses the popular late medieval images of the passion of Christ in order to explore their queer possibilities, which for Mills means “a broader range of signifying possibilities than the straightforwardly heterosexual” (p. 195). An Afterword juxtaposes the campy “passion” photograph reproduced on a contemporary Easter flyer for a gay nightclub in London with the medieval passion imagery to remind the reader that how one suspends one’s fantasy between heaven and earth is crucial to what kinds of pleasures one might take in pain.

Like Foucault who used ekphrasis (a rhetorical technique that re-presents a visual image as an affective verbal text) to punctuate his supersessionary notions of what counts as premodernity and modernity--think of his famous discussion of Velazquez’s *Las Meninas* (1656), Mills, too, advances his arguments about aestheticization through ekphrasis. This technique helps him to expose how visual images structure empathic response. The process whereby images foreclose empathy for the hanging, flayed or otherwise tortured body, he calls “aestheticization.” His ekphrastic readings seek to recuperate empathy when he thinks it is denied in medieval images (take for instance his ekphrastic reading of the *Judgment of Cambyses*). Mills thus engages in a mode of ethical criticism that commemorates what cannot be spoken in the past by naming it in the present. But Graham Hammill has urged queer studies to problematize such ethical critique even further by questioning how time itself gets recruited to introduce a difference *in the very act of naming*: “relations between sexuality and time are not just problems for the present” (p. 3).^[5] In other words, it is important to problematize queer ekphrasis in ways that are mindful of how constitutive it was to forming the modern discipline of art history in the work of Johann Joachim Winckelmann (1717-1768) and also how constitutive it is of Foucault’s disciplinary critique. What is the thinking of pain and pleasure in the technique of ekphrasis?

Hans Belting has argued that the late medieval holy image had become ekphrastic-like. According to him, the pious laity demanded of the image a “kind of painted act of speech, which henceforth would determine the aesthetic system” (p. 410).^[6] The vocal vivacity of the image was at the heart of the bitter iconomachy of the fifteenth- and sixteenth centuries, an iconomachy that Mills unaccountably fails to address. Not only did medieval images both constitute and reflect pain and punishment, their viewers

increasingly subjected them to pain and pleasure as imagined sentient artifacts. Take for example this case of two iconoclastic Lollards (Lollards, a dissenting group, were categorized by the Catholic Church as heretics by the early fifteenth century), who, sometime in the 1380s, were alleged to have taken a statue of St. Katherine, a favorite in the medieval pantheon of tortured and martyred virgins, and decapitated it before they threw it into the fire to heat up their cabbage soup. They wagered as follows: “for if her head should bleed when we strike it, then we shall worship her as a saint. On the other hand if no blood flows, she will make fire to cook our stew, and thus our hunger will be abated.”[7]

It is as if the scholarly impulse of *Suspended Animation* would be to take the burning statue of St. Katherine out of the fire rather than to touch the ashes it left behind. At times, it seemed to me that its interpretations re-enact rather than question the nostalgia for medieval scholasticism that haunts Lacanian psychoanalysis, one of the chief interpretive tools of this book. Julia Reinhard Lupton, Bruce Holsinger and myself have asked what a Lacanian mourning for a Christian hagiography of pain and punishment might mean for Lacanian interpretation, especially when it comes to medieval evidence.[8]

The pain and punishment to which images, imagined as sentient artifacts, were increasingly subjected in the fifteenth- and sixteenth centuries is as productive and constitutive of the penal imaginary as the pain and punishment which they depicted. The ashes of such medieval images and of those women and men burnt for mortifying them need to be brought into touch with the extant images so deftly discussed by Mills. Let there be as Mills desires, a Middle Ages that is not one.

NOTES

[1] Carla Freccero, *Queer/Early/Modern* (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2006); Elizabeth Freeman, “Time Binds, or, Erotichistory,” *Social Text*, 23 (2005): 57-68; Cesare Casarino, “Pornocairology: Or, The Communist Clinamen of Pornography,” *Paragraph*, 15 (2002): 259-69.

[2] L. O. Aranye Fradenburg, *Sacrifice Your Love: Psychoanalysis, Historicism, Chaucer* (Minneapolis, Minn.: University of Minnesota Press, 2002).

[3] Karma Lochrie, *Heterosyncrasies: Female Sexuality When Normal Wasn't* (Minneapolis, Minn.: University of Minnesota Press, 2005).

[4] Carolyn Dinshaw, *Getting Medieval: Sexualities and Communities, Pre-and Postmodern* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1999).

[5] Graham Hammill, *Sexuality and Form: Caravaggio, Marlowe, and Bacon* (Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 2000).

[6] Hans Belting, *Likeness and Presence: A History of the Image before the Era of Art* (Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 1994).

[7] Sarah Stanbury, “The Vivacity of Images: St. Katherine, Knighton’s Lollards, and the Breaking of Images,” in Jeremy Dimmick, James Simpson, Nicolette Zeeman, eds., *Images, Idolatry, and Iconoclasm in Late Medieval England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), pp. 131-50.

[8] Kathleen Biddick, *The Typological Imaginary: Circumcision, Technology, History* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003); Julia Reinhard Lupton, *Afterlives of the Saints: Hagiography, Typology, and Renaissance Literature* (Palo Alto, Cal.: Stanford University Press, 1996); Bruce Holsinger, *The Premodern Condition: Medievalism and the Making of Theory* (Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 2005).

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