

Review

REVIEW: Timothy S. Jones and David A. Sprunger, eds. *Marvels, Monsters, and Miracles: Studies in the Medieval and Early Modern Imaginations*. Studies in Medieval Culture 42. Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 2002.

To appreciate this collection of scholarly essays, it is important to connect with the obvious zeal that empowers its contributors. This specific edition started—as so many of these do—as a panel of presentations at the Thirtieth international Congress on Medieval Studies in Kalamazoo, May 1995, to honor the career of John Block Friedman. Timothy S. Jones and David A. Sprunger, whose dissertations were both guided by Friedman, initially shaped this collection as a tribute to a singular career. Their self-imposed efforts have also created a third layer in the continuity of the arcane field of “monster studies,” a mission made even more tumultuous and pertinent by the ongoing release of the cinematic version of J. R. R. Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings* trilogy and subsequent attention in the public-sector press. The cosmic serendipity of all this has to be admired.

To start this third phase of our scholarly “monster-trilogy,” a road map is necessary. That has been provided in an overview of academic perceptions of the medieval era written by Yale historian Paul Freedman. He correctly argues against an over-simplification of medieval historiography and thus points out that monster studies is really a study of “the other”—the politically and socially marginalized sub-cultures that so fascinated Western Europe. Ultimately, he insists that a study of “the other” is really a study of ourselves. Greta Austin follows up by reminding us of the vertical nature of medieval cosmology and its similarly focused theology. In her critical assessment, the monstrous races seen in medieval imaginative travel literature really address a unique cultural obsession: how all things are saved. Soteriology, from her perspective, is really the hidden agenda of all this imagery.

Several contributors, then, focus on examples of medieval imagination in the light of the scholarly frame established by Freedman and Austin. Andrea Rossi-Reder and Martin Carmargo continue Austin’s interest in imaginative travel literature and shape their responses to monster studies from that context. Rossi-Reder focuses on

Review

medieval Europe's obsession with India as a setting for strange wonders (as she quotes David Spurr) "that can be described but not interpreted." Carmargo uses *The Book of John Mandeville* to remind us that in medieval cosmology all geographical descriptions were centered on Jerusalem—the presumed center of the known world.

Thomas Hall and Joyce Tally Lionarons take a different pathway; they examine the monstrous nature of miracles described in samples of Christian hagiography and—by extension—the concomitant rationalization of all things impossible. Hall analyzes many examples of the "miracle of the lengthened beam" as described throughout the lore of this literature, while Lionarons walks us through the monstrosity of medieval legends of Saint Christopher.

Both soteriology and hagiography naturally lead to a process of demonization that was endemic in the medieval world view. In that context, Malcolm Jones, David Sprunger, Norman R. Smith, and Mary Blaine Campbell examine contemporaneous art as iconography of the unknown and thus evil "other." Malcolm Jones finds the inherent misogyny of the beasts Bigorne and Chiceface to be a singularly appropriate icon of that fascination with the morally monstrous. Sprunger examines how the insane are treated as examples of that same perspective. Smith is concerned about imaginative descriptions of portentous births, while Campbell uses the Nude Cyclops as an icon of this portentous "other."

Michael W. Twomey, Kristin M. Figg, and Paul Battles's contribution is to demonstrate how all this works in better-known examples of medieval literary fiction. Twomey investigates specific monstrous sub-plots in *Cleanness*. Figg examines Froissart's "Debate of the Horse and Greyhound" and the innocent monstrosity of domestic animals that have the power of speech. Battles surveys the magic described in Chaucer's Franklin's Tale.

Finally, Timothy S. Jones moves the same concepts into documented examples of military history taken from the *Gesta Herewardi*.

The critical influence of Tolkien and Friedman over this collection of essays is hard to ignore. Without Tolkien's paradigm-breaking address before the British Academy in 1936, there would be no "ur" document upon which monster studies as a valid—yet arcane—sub-set

Review

could be build. What Tolkien did was to insist that such monsters need no other justification than the imagination of humanity itself. Austin early in the collection establishes that influence as a given. John Block Friedman carried monster studies forward both by publishing in 1981 his work, *The Monstrous Races in Medieval Art and Thought*, and by challenging a pool of unusual graduate students (five of whom contributed here) to carry that same insight forward into their own scholarship. Not surprisingly, most of the fourteen contributors of this collection of essays cite Friedman in some way or another. It has taken the talents and perseverance of Jones and Sprunger, however, to bring this third phase of our scholarly monster trilogy to the attention of the wider academy.

Why should this collection be included in one's personal reference library? Knowing several of the contributors certainly sparked my initial interest, and I have always admired critical essays that are simultaneously lucid and instructive. The trilogical—and thus repetitive—nature of this study demands that our monsters be treated with deference; they are not nearly as ghastly as we might first expect. While a literary fantasy, these "others" are iconographically ourselves, and self-examination always provides an uncomfortable yet powerful teachable moment.

Norbert A. Wethington, Oberlin College