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Review of Monsters, Gender, and Sexuality in Medieval English Literature by Dana Oswald

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oped. Lydgate's dependence on Duke Humphrey rather woodenly frames an interesting discussion of Lydgate's portrayals of "Fortune" in *Fall of Princes*, where, Mitchell argues, Fortune may be seen either as a comfortingly limited embodiment of contingency (the view of Strohm et al.) or—Mitchell's preference—a sign of figurality as such, indicating that poetry is dependent on the vicissitudes of language, which is "at least as difficult to stabilize as the unstable reality language expresses." That thought leads to the kind of claim where Mitchell's strength at phenomenological analysis is more visible: "So Fortune [in Lydgate] becomes the name of that which gives access to a dynamic becoming, welcoming the future to come, which can only ever be presented figuratively" (p. 96). Lydgate's rhetoric is rarely granted such philosophical attention, but the experiment is merited—as, too, is the unusual intellectual respect granted to Usk's *Testament*, not to mention the *Chaunce of the Dyse*.

Tensions and differences between and within these authors' ethics of contingency, especially in the varying lights on them that the modern philosophers cast, are visible but not gathered up by any comprehensive conclusion. We are left with dense and not always developed, though sometimes brilliant, chapter conclusions. The use of Levinas helps show Criseyde's acceptance of love as a kind of moral affirmation of encountering Otherness but perhaps also makes sexual love an alternative to real ethics (p. 46). The use of Williams to read Malory presents Malory as much more cynical about the way morality is defined by outcome than the other writers. By this point surely this should be used to tell us something more than our need to expand our understanding of an "ethical adventure" (p. 130). Like Scotus, Mitchell is intent on disclosing the falsity of "generic understanding" in responding to the particular and eventful; and this falsity includes, for him, modern historicist explications, as in claims that the figure of Fortune is a mere mystification of social power (p. 36). Historicism need not explicate that crudely; there are intellectual virtues in working out the denser contexts of ideas as well as politics. But the value of resisting hermeneutically labeled and empirically bounded contexts is clear: that resistance allows Mitchell to bestir a selective but stimulating debate between Scotist haecceity, modern phenomenology, and late-medieval English literature, whose "vernacular ethics" exploring the way circumstances shape morality is as poignantly clear in Malory's laconically eventful narrative as it is in Chaucer's explicitly "philosophical" *Troilus*.

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DANA OSWALD, *Monsters, Gender, and Sexuality in Medieval English Literature*. (Gender in the Middle Ages, 5.) Woodbridge, Eng., and Rochester, N.Y.: Boydell and Brewer, 2010. Pp. viii, 227 plus 8 black-and-white images. \$95. ISBN: 978-1843842323. doi:10.1017/S0038713412000528

The perceived gender, overt sexuality, and frightening reproductive potential of medieval monsters are placed under the cultural micro- and macro-scope in this revised dissertation, an ambitious and provocative (if sometimes self-limited) addition to the growing field of monster studies. As with most recent explorations in the field, Dana Oswald's argument (repeated with force and regularity throughout) relies heavily on the work of Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, focusing on monsters as embodiments of cultural anxiety. However, the haunting traces of monstrosity collected by Oswald lead her to proclaim that not only does the monster always escape (as theorized by Cohen), but that "the monster always returns" (p. 18, for example), thus further emphasizing the particularly sexual anxieties that this collection of "human monsters" embody.

Through select close readings of *The Wonders of the East*, *Beowulf*, *Mandeville's Travels*, the Alliterative *Morte Arthure*, and *Sir Gowther*, Oswald paints convincing patterns

of erasure and transformation that uphold the standard cultural divide of medieval England: in Old English literature and illumination, sexualized monsters are erased, while in Middle English literature, such monsters may be either erased or transformed. Thus, static Old English monsters reinforce “the Anglo-Saxon understanding of the body as unchanging and inflexible” (p. 65), while potentially metamorphic Middle English monsters reflect cultural anxieties regarding miscegenation and contamination wherein “no body, even a human one, is ever truly stable” (p. 195). Yet regardless of the attempted eradication process, Oswald argues that a Derridean ‘trace’ of the monster always remains, whether in narrative recollections of the monster (as when Beowulf recounts his battles with the Grendelkin but omits certain details), or in parallel actions undertaken by those who sought to erase the monster in the first place (as when King Arthur’s own heirless impotence recalls his earlier emasculation of the hypersexual Giant of Mont St. Michel).

In the first chapter, Oswald establishes a useful vocabulary of erasure to be employed throughout. In addition to traditional ‘removing’ (in which “parts of the image are literally excised by the scribe or a later viewer”), Oswald adds ‘never drawing’ (a comparative erasure, in which “one manuscript features explicitly sexed bodies, but . . . others never draw these bodies as sexed in the first place”) and ‘revising’ (in which “the artist does not excise certain parts, but rather changes details of the image so that the effect or message of the image shifts,” p. 41). Following her comparative analysis of the “indecent bodies” depicted in *The Wonders of the East*, Oswald concludes that any attempted erasure of sexed monstrous bodies is “inspired not by prudery, but by a more complex process of repression and sublimation” that seeks to remove the “ideological and reproductive threats” of human monsters (p. 65).

Turning sharply from this intriguing art-historical analysis, Oswald performs a relentless psychoanalytic evaluation of the hero Beowulf in chapter 2 (previously published in *Exemplaria*). Grendel’s severed arm and head are “phallic signifiers” appropriated to increase Beowulf’s own sense of masculine identity; Grendel’s mother is the “archaic mother” who “symbolically castrates Beowulf” by reclaiming her son’s severed arm (p. 96); Beowulf can only defeat Grendel’s “parthenogenic mother” by taking up “a phallus that belongs not to men, but to giants” (p. 84), and so on. Although the repetitive parsing of such metaphors can be wearisome at times, here it ultimately serves to clarify Beowulf’s attempted erasure (via symbolic castration, literal beheading, and edited narration) of his monstrous encounters in the poem and, by extension, Anglo-Saxon anxieties over the social body.

Chapter 3 crosses into the Middle English period with a truly compelling look at the “monstrous feminine” portrayed in *Mandeville’s Travels*: Hyppocrates’s draconic daughter; the corpse-mother of a hideous flying head; the self-mutilating one-breasted Amazons; and the poison virgins, whose vaginas may contain serpents. In these episodes, “monstrosity and reproduction are intimately related to the problem of transformation” (p. 156) as each female monster “passes for human” in some way and thus represents post-plague societal fears of miscegenation.

Finally, in deliberate contraposition to the four female monsters chosen for inclusion in chapter 3, chapter 4 presents Sir Gowther and King Arthur, two knights whose narratives involve violent, hyper-masculinized monsters: the Giant of Mont St. Michel and Gowther himself. As in the *Beowulf* chapter, Oswald traces myriad phallic metaphors in the Alliterative *Morte* to show the unstable masculine authority of the hero and his unsuccessful attempt to erase his monstrous castration anxiety. Conversely, Gowther is compared to the transformative female monsters of Mandeville: Gowther struggles with his own demonic paternity before a miracle enables him to pass as human; nevertheless, because Gowther could potentially father demonic progeny of his own, he retains the “trace” of his previous monstrosity.

This book revisits the author's doctoral dissertation, and its style and scope reflect its origins. Too often, Oswald simply reiterates her primary (and many) secondary theses when further elaboration or argumentation would be more helpful, and, at times, her definitions seem in flux. In particular, the focus of Oswald's study—"human monsters"—sometimes seems a limit of convenience. Demons (who often appear in humanoid form, and who—as in the case of Gowther's father—are often decidedly gendered) are not considered monsters (p. 164 n. 7), which conveniently removes saints' lives from scrutiny. Likewise, the two men raised from the dead in *Mandeville's Travels* are dismissed as "miracles rather than monsters" (pp. 120–21 n. 5), which enables Oswald's feminist reading of Mandeville's monsters to remain unchallenged. Yet Gowther, "the son of a demon [who] is transformed through a miracle and the blessing of God and the Pope," is deemed a human monster (p. 187). Surely, the transformative and sexual aspects of demons must have resonated as monstrous, and surely the trace of death—of non-normative physicality, or monstrosity—must have remained in Mandeville's resurrected men. Monstrous taxonomies are always tricky, but in a work of this scope, such *mearcstapa* deserve more than dismissive footnotes.

Other premises would benefit from further explication as well. Oswald's claim that the penises and breasts found on monsters "are distinctly human; animals' reproductive and secondary attributes are profoundly different" (p. 29) would be far more convincing had medieval depictions of animal genitalia been included for comparison. As she notes, since most genitalia have been at least partially effaced in Old English art, it is rather difficult to tell that a monster's penis is a human one. That the human monsters depicted in *Wonders* are all upright bipeds with opposable thumbs seems to mark more strongly their humanity than does their "trace" genitalia.

Finally, medieval English culture was neither defined solely by, nor recorded only in, the English language. If Oswald wishes to solidify her larger claims regarding monstrosity in the English Middle Ages, a subsequent investigation into non-English texts must follow.

On the whole, *Monsters, Gender, and Sexuality in Medieval English Literature* offers a compelling long view of the monstrous medieval body, and Oswald's novel readings of lesser-known monsters—especially the tusked women of *Wonders*, the poison virgins in *Mandeville*, and the tusked Alexander of Johannes Hartlieb—are fresh and exhilarating. Throughout her book, Oswald claims that "the monster always returns" and ends by arguing that "we are all monsters" (p. 207). I hope that she and other modern teratologists will return to further trace the intriguing ideas outlined in this fine first foray.

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JAMES T. PALMER, *Anglo-Saxons in a Frankish World, 690–900*. (Studies in the Early Middle Ages, 19.) Turnhout: Brepols, 2009. Pp. xii, 324; 2 maps. €70. ISBN: 978-2503519111. doi:10.1017/S003871341200053X

The many Anglo-Saxons who made their careers in Francia, such as Willibrord of Echter-nach, Boniface of Mainz, and Leoba of Tauberbischofsheim, have already attracted so much attention that it is virtually impossible to say anything new about them. This work, like the overwhelming majority of previous publications, is based on the standard set of printed sources associated with the so-called Anglo-Saxon missionaries to Germany: their letters, their contemporary and near-contemporary biographies, some annals, and charters and legislation connected with their activities.

The book "reassesses the importance of the Anglo-Saxon 'missions' to the Frankish kingdoms through an exploration of the relationship between efforts to shape the religious life and hagiographical reinterpretations of those efforts" (p. 37). James Palmer synthe-