Introduction: Bodies Modern and Medieval

Debra Higgs Strickland
(Glasgow Centre for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, University of Glasgow)

'Un/Worldly Bodies', this eighth issue of *eSharp*, demonstrates a cross-disciplinary and diachronic concern with the human body, a problem that has received much critical attention especially during the past fifteen years. Six studies address various aspects of corporeality from economic, literary, legal, art historical and religious perspectives. Four of the six reveal a particular concern with the female body--as proscribed, pathologized, legalized, or sanctified--and all six demonstrate the interconnectedness of theoretical issues related to the body, gender, and identity.

In this brief introduction, I use works of medieval painting and metalwork--objects of my own art historical concerns--as a focus for some observations about these themes. As products of the 'middle' (ages), I suggest that medieval images of or related to the body raise questions that can be projected both forwards and backwards. In support of this claim, I identify ways of broadly linking my selected images to the topics examined by the 'Un/Worldly Bodies' authors as well as to certain projects of other critics, past and current.

Figure 1. Ethiopia, *Le livre des merveilles du monde*. Angers? c. 1460. New York, Morgan Library, MS M. 461, fol. 26v (detail). Photographic credit: The Pierpont Morgan Library, New York.

In her elegant study, *Empire of Magic*, Geraldine Heng observed that in medieval travel literature, bodies are constantly on display (2003). An image from a

late fifteenth-century Book of Marvels displays the inhabitants of Ethiopia, a fantastic land located on the periphery of the then-known world (fig. 1). It is a land teeming with strange and hybridized bodies, ranging from the giant-eared Panotii, to winged dragons, to the horned Tragopa bird. In their explorations of theoretical connections between bodies and identity, especially self-identity, modern critics have shown how by observing, condemning and praising foreign bodies, medieval Christians forged images of *themselves*, either as superior to uncivilized, semi-human groups ripe for colonization (as here in Ethiopia) or as falling well short of idealized models of technological and political development (as in Marco Polo's Cathay) (Higgins 1997, pp.127-29, pp.143-49; de Weever 1998, p.xxviii; Strickland, 2005).

Figure 2. Martyrdom of St Apollonia. Jean Fouquet, *Hours of Etienne Chevalier* (detached leaf). Paris, 15th c. Chantilly, Musée Condé. Photo RMN: Reproduced by permission of the Musée Condé, Chantilly.

My own art historical interests lie in the medieval body's function as a visual metaphor for virtue or vice, sanctity or evil. This approach sees the body as a physiognomical sign system, in which individual parts and features point the way to

something else (Mellinkoff 1993, Strickland 2003). In a startlingly graphic image of female martyrdom from the fifteenth-century *Hours of Étienne Chevalier* (fig. 2), the luminous white skin of Saint Apollonia shines with the purity of extreme sanctity, and contrasts with the swarthy dark skin of her tormentors that marks moral depravity. As the artist also makes plain through the inclusion of the riveted crowd, the martyrdom of Christian bodies is also a form of theatre. In her article, 'Proclaiming Christ: The Bodies of Martyrs in Early Christianity', Elena Martin puts forward the thesis that with their bodies, the early martyr-saints visually communicated the Christian faith, and that female saints gained extra spiritual credit for their stoical endurance of martyrdom owing to the prevalent belief that because they were women, God had created them physically weak. But Christianity held no monopoly on the spiritual meanings of performing bodies, and so corporeal theatre also lies at the heart of Kirsten Bedigan's art historical survey of masks in Greek vase-painting, 'Changed Appearances: The Use of Masks on the Ceramics from the Theban Kabeirion in Greece'. In light of her assembled evidence of the vase imagery, the relationship Bedigan posits between theatre and the cult at Kabeirion suggests the equal centrality of the communicative body in *non*-Christian, performative religious contexts.

Figure 3. Arm reliquary. Mosan, c. 1230. New York, Metropolitan Museum, Cloisters Collection (47.101.33).

Perhaps more than any other contemporary cultural institution, the medieval cult of relics revealed the desire to have intimate contact with a precious sacred body. Why else would bits of bone, skull and hair be so carefully and expensively enshrined in sumptuous containers made of precious materials to be put on display for public veneration (fig. 3)? In *Fragmentation and Redemption* and other published work, Caroline Walker Bynum has examined the medieval concern with the fragmented body in relation to Christian anxieties about what would happen to their own bodies after death (1991, pp.239-97; 1995a; 1995b). But we should also remember that the possession of relics--body parts--was a key way by which monasteries maintained economic control: during the middle ages, relics were a vital source of revenue because they attracted pilgrims and their money donations. In her article, 'The Third World Body Commodified: Manjula Padmanabhan's *Harvest*', Shital Pravinchandra examines a related modern phenomenon, the medical trade in human organs sold by the Third World to the First. Pravinchandra traces the creation of an 'occult economy' which may be compared to the medieval case. For both medievals and moderns, the trade in body parts--whether of saints or of ordinary folk--fed the social imaginaries of the labouring poor. Pravinchandra argues that for the modern poor, body parts cannibalistically consumed by the wealthy feed the dream of economic survival; for the medieval poor, bits of holy bones fed the dream of direct contact with the saints and of bodily resurrection at the end of time.

Figure 4. Adam and Eve, psalter. England, c. 1270. Cambridge, St Johns College MS K.26, fol. 4r. Reproduced by permission of the Masters and Fellows of St John's College, Cambridge.

Bodies are always gendered: male, female or hermaphroditic. During the middle ages, much anxiety was generated by the perceived weaknesses of the female body, largely ruined, both physically and morally, by Eve. An image of Adam and Eve from a thirteenth-century English psalter contains two notable features that underscore these weaknesses: Eve's obvious culpability for the act of disobedience--high-fiving the serpent as she accepts the apple--and the fact that the serpent's face is also a woman's (fig. 4). Peter Stallybrass has argued that within dominating cultural discourses, a woman's body could be both the civilized and the dangerous terrain that had to be colonized (1986, p.133). Certainly in medieval art and literature, Eve represented the female body as something desirable and dangerous that demanded control. Both Melissa Ann Crowder and Holly Luhning address the problem of controlling women's bodies in later centuries. In 'Beside Myself: The Abject in Charlotte Perkins Gilmans 'The Yellow Wallpaper', Crowder examines the effects of Victorian social restrictions on women which in the fictional narrative of *The Yellow Wallpaper* results for one woman in the forced psychological separation of her body from her intellect, or in modern critical terms, abjection. In 'Manacles of Madness: Haywood's *The Distress'd Orphan; or Love in a Madhouse*', Luhning looks at the

ways in which eighteenth-century English patriarchal society upheld what were essentially medieval ideas concerning the female body: as weak, dangerous and in need of control; and how these social forces confined women's bodies either to marriage or the madhouse.

Figure 5. Female personifications of the empire; Otto III flanked by representatives of Church and State. *Gospel Book of Otto III*. Reichenau? c. 998. Munich, Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, MS Clm. 4453, fols. 23v-24r. Reproduced by permission of the Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, Munich.

During the middle ages, the body also functioned as a metaphor for the state, as described in contemporary literature such as John of Salisbury's *Policraticus* of 1159. A famous pair of folios from the late tenth-century *Gospel Book of Otto III* show the eponymous ruler flanked by representatives of Church and State while receiving his empire, personified as four barefooted females inscribed *Sclavinia*, *Germania*, *Gallia* and *Roma* (fig. 5). In this visual metaphor, hierarchy is expressed as a man embodying state and religious authority, while the body of the empire is expressed by subservient women. The problem of gender in the modern legal body is analyzed by Michelle Weldon in 'The Parental Body in Law: An Examination of How the Working Parent is Conceptualized in Labour Law'. In this study, we see the confluence of all three issues of body, gender and identity in relation to the perceived beneficiaries of family-friendly legislation which, although described in gender-neutral language, Weldon identifies as working women.

Figure 6. Blemmyae, *Marvels of the East*. England, c. 1050. London, British Library, MS Cot. Tib. B.V, fol. 82r (detail). Reproduced by permission of The British Library, London. Further reproduction prohibited.

Medieval bodies pushed to their outer conceptual limits are monstrous. Modern critics have read monstrous medieval bodies as cultural texts in ways that suggest interesting social and political interpretations for monsters such as the headless Blemmyae depicted in an Anglo-Saxon copy of the Marvels of the East (fig. 6). In *Rabelais and His World*, Mikhail Bahktin characterizes the grotesque body as something that is 'unfinished, outgrows itself, transgresses its own limits…it interrogates and subverts the prevailing culture' (1984, p.26). This approach has been compellingly developed by Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, who sees the monster as 'pure culture' that can signal crises in both masculine and national identities (1996, p.4; 1999; 2003). A representational problem, the Blemmyae--giant, naked and dangerous--is a body recognizably human but simultaneously and utterly not so. As Cohen notes, medieval monsters transgress cultural boundaries, break social rules--and they always return.

Figure 7. Trinity, psalter. England, c. 1270. Cambridge, St John's College, MS K.26, fol. 9r. Reproduced by permission of the Masters and Fellows of St John's College, Cambridge.

But monstrous medieval bodies are not all bad: witness the rendering of a three-headed God in another of the prefatory miniatures from the same thirteenth-century English psalter cited above (fig. 7). Like the Anglo-Saxon Blemmyae, this monstrous, trinitarian God transgresses boundaries, breaks rules and will not go away. But unlike the Blemmyae, it is also divine. Such imagery was controversial in its day precisely owing to the uneasy couching of God in a form--the *vultus trifons*--used in other contexts to denote things demonic. It is a type of image that Robert Mills has connected to a broader medieval problem for which he has coined the pithy phrase, 'Jesus as monster' (2004). It is also an image that bears witness to the fact that during the middle ages, monstrous bodies were not just looming on the periphery; they also occupied the centre. And so the six studies collected in this eighth issue of *eSharp* map a diachronic, cross-cultural journey that affirms and underscores the centrality of the body--whether positive or negative, sacred or ordinary, human or monstrous, domestic or foreign, male or female, self or other.

Bibliography

Bahktin, M., 1984. *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Helene Iswolsky. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Bynum, C.W., 1991. *Fragmentation and Redemption: Essays on Gender and the Human Body in Medieval Religion*. New York: Zone Books.

Bynum, C.W., 1995a. *The Resurrection of the Body in Western Christianity, 200-1336*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Bynum, C.W., 1995b. 'Why All the Fuss about the Body? A Medievalist's Perspective', *Critical Inquiry* 22, pp.1-33.

Cohen, J.J., 1996. 'Monster Culture (Seven Theses)', in J.J. Cohen (ed.), *Monster Theory: Reading Culture*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, pp.3-25.

Cohen, J.J., 1999. *Of Giants: Sex, Monsters, and the Middle Ages*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Cohen, J.J., 2003. *Medieval Identity Machines*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

de Weever, J., 1998. *Sheba's Daughters: Whitening and Demonizing the Saracen Woman in Medieval French Epic*. New York: Garland.

Heng, G., 2003. *Empire of Magic: Medieval Romance and the Politics of Cultural Fantasy*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Higgins, I.M., 1997. *Writing East: The "Travels" of Sir John Mandeville*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

Mellinkoff, R., 1993. *Outcasts: Signs of Otherness in Northern European Art of the Late Middle Ages*. 2 vols. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Mills, R., 2004. 'Jesus as Monster', in B. Bildhauer and R. Mills (eds), *The Monstrous Middle Age*s. Cardiff: University of Wales Press, pp.28-54.

Stallybrass, P., 1986. 'Patriarchal Territories: The Body Enclosed', in M.W. Ferguson, M. Quilligan and N.J. Vickers (eds), *Rewriting the Renaissance: The Discourses of Sexual Difference in Early Modern Europe*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, pp.123-42.

Strickland, D., 2003. *Saracens, Demons, and Jews: Making Monsters in Medieval Art*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Strickland, D., 2005. ‘Artists, Audience, and Ambivalence in Marco Polo’s *Divisament dou monde*’, *Viator* 36, pp.493-529.