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Review of Lisa Verner, *The Epistemology of the Monstrous in the Middle Ages*

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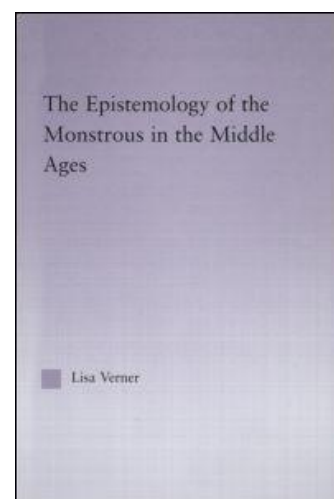
But these issues aside, Moskowitz has succeeded remarkably well in meeting the competing objectives required of a book of this type and, like the author's previous survey text, *Italian Gothic Sculpture*, it will make an excellent teaching resource. Writing in 1969 of the pulpit at Pistoia, Michael Ayrton described it as 'one of the greatest complexes of relief sculpture in Christian art'. He also noted that he had 'never seen more than five people in its presence'. Little has changed. Hopefully, *Pious Devotions, Pious Diversions* will serve to introduce a new generation of students to these rich and fascinating works. If even a handful of these are inspired to conduct research into the many open questions that hover around this group of pulpits, the book will have more than succeeded.

Review of Lisa Verner, *The Epistemology of the Monstrous in the Middle Ages* (New York: Routledge, 2005), ISBN: 0415972434

By Asa Mittman

Lisa Verner's *The Epistemology of the Monstrous in the Middle Ages* (New York: Routledge, 2005), based on her Tulane dissertation of the same title (2001) provides detailed and careful analysis, with clear attention to literary detail and to the influence of sources upon later works. Indeed, her very clear and helpful accounts of the origin and distribution of each of the major texts described should serve to make this book a convenient point of reference for researchers orienting themselves in the study of medieval monstrosity. There is a slight disingenuity in the work's title and opening discussion, in that her subject is really *The Epistemology of the Monstrous in Medieval England*; three of her four chapters explicitly focus on English texts. Even her discussion of *Mandeville's Travels*, French texts written around 1356, focuses not on the original text but rather, on the Middle English translation, despite "its mistranslations and slavish and unidiomatic translations of the French." (125) Verner does mention Old and Middle English in her introduction, but never openly takes on this more specific focus, which would have not diminished her study. Rather, as England seems to have been a major locus for the interest in monstrosity, it would have been a fitting choice.

In her introduction, Verner harshly challenges the "freak show" analogy often found in discussions of medieval monsters, as well as concepts of the grotesque, Kristeva's theory of abjection and, by implication, all modern theoretical approaches, as "clearly temporally biased." (1) Consequently, her bibliography contains numerous dusty works (even discounting editions of primary texts, a full half of her sources are more than two decades old, and much useful recent scholarship is omitted) and very few theorists or historians who make extensive use thereof appear (the sole exception being Michel Foucault, who is invoked briefly in the conclusion, though passages in which he explicitly discusses the Middle Ages). Instead, she argues, we need to examine what medievals said about monsters to see what they thought about them. She rightly questions "the insistence on seeing [monsters] as 'real,' and therefore scientific mistakes, or as purely literary metaphors, and therefore narrative blunders." (8) The pre-Enlightenment context was radically different from our own, and so



the terms of her investigation are, as well. This remains a valid, worthwhile project, though many useful insights have come from the sort of scholarship she dismisses.

Verner's attempts to define the slippery term "monster" must therefore rely solely on medieval documents (though she might have considered medieval evidence beyond texts). She does so first through the uniformly cited discussions by Augustine and Isidore, but she extends this study past that found in other works on the subject, adding nuance through citation of parallel discussions in the *Liber Monstrorum*, *Bestiary*, and *Mandeville's Travels*, the latter of which "offers the first really useful definition of *monster*: 'a monster is a þing difformed aþen kynde bothe of man or of best or of ony þing elles.'" (5)

In laying out her overarching structure, Verner claims that the early works are all moralizing or spiritual in nature, and here tips of the reader to one of her two troubling elisions in an otherwise strong argument. The early *Wonders of the East* can in no way be characterized as moralizing or spiritual, unless it is confused with the later *Marvels of the East* manuscripts (as will occur here). The second omission, relevant to the *Wonders* and other works, is any discussion of the impact of visual imagery on medieval understandings of monstrosity.

Her discussion proper begins with Classical and Patristic sources, with the assertion that the Christian texts differs from their pagan sources like Pliny in that they look for meaning in the monsters, rather than just noting their existence. These meanings would come to be more important than the accuracy of their accounts. Isidore, for example, was not bothered by his conclusion that many of monsters he discusses do not exist—this did not stop them from bearing meaning, since he was striving to find theological truths, not to discuss biology. (33)

In her second chapter, which focuses on the Anglo-Saxons, Verner makes what may be her most valuable addition to our understanding of these texts. Though a very careful analysis of the sources for every passage in the *Liber Monstrorum*, she finds that "all the material which the author of the *Liber Monstrorum* considers spurious has either a pagan or a secular source; none of the material whose veracity is questionable derives from a patristic or explicitly Christian source." (60) Therefore, as she argues:

Theological allegiance alone is enough to determine truth or falsehood about monsters. The degree to which a particular monster is fantastic or grotesque has little to do with veracity, for many of the monsters whose existence remains at least unquestioned and who derive from a Christian source are no less marvelous than some of Virgil's censured monsters. (63)

This fascinating observation should do a great deal to lay to rest discussions of the scientific accuracy of medieval texts, since this was never their aim, nor was it of particular interest to their audience. In addition, it might serve as a model for understanding medieval texts, more broadly speaking, as they were assessed on criteria very different from that which we usually bring to texts.

Unfortunately, the excellent discussion of the *Liber Monstrorum* is followed by a weaker account of the *Wonders of the East*, a text often troublingly effaced in discussions of medieval monstrosity. She refers to this text as "geographically linear," (65) indicating that she has not paid the same meticulous attention to the geography of the *Wonders* that she focused upon the *Liber Monstrorum's* sources. Here, she is close to the discussion in Heather Blurton's *Cannibalism in High Medieval Literature* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007).

Blurton writes that the *Wonders* has:

an almost obsessive concern with measuring distance and mapping location. The distances to and from the reader's stops on this strange journey through a fabulous eastern landscape are carefully measured out on two different scales, by direction (south of), or topography (near a river; on an island). The effect of these descriptive directions is to paint a mental map of the east, with location, distance, and landmarks all clearly located. (48)

In contrast to the assertions of both of these authors, the directions contained in each episode of the *Wonders*, if followed, would send the reader spinning in circles, neither traveling in a straight line nor clearly locating anything. Not only are many directions impossible to follow, but those portions which may be tracked move in no consistent direction. Rather, they meander, backtrack, and drift through the southeastern quarter of the world, as envisioned in early medieval England.

Perhaps this lack of focus results from her opinion (shared by many) that the *Wonders of the East* (the Old English illustrated text found in the *Beowulf* Manuscript) is the "least attractive" of three related manuscripts (the latter two of which are more precisely known as the *Marvels of East*, after their Latin content). Indeed, it seems that Verner shares a common aversion to the *Wonders*, which she refers to as "problematic" three times in five pages. (61, 65) This chapter concludes provocatively that the *Wonder's* perspective is "pseudo-pagan," (71) in that it lacks any reference to "higher meaning" (73), and argues that it is intended to demonstrate to Christian readers the emptiness of this perspective. She then argues that the authors of the two *Marvels* texts strove to make their works "more obviously Christian." (71) This is accomplished through the addition of Christian texts, including the tale of Jamnes and Mambres (which she assumes to be part of the second recension, though this is certainly debatable—it may simply be the next work in the miscellany).

This discussion provides thoughtful comparisons between the earlier *Wonders* and the later *Marvels*, but later in her text, when making her broader conclusions, Verner muddies the distinctions between these disparate works. She writes:

The *Wonders of the East*, for example, lists and describes monsters and marvels but then annihilates any pleasure the reader may have taken in their monstrous sensationalism by ending on a clearly religious note. Both alternative endings, the story of Jamnes and Mambres and the tale of the accursed dancers, actually shame the reader for any sensational pleasure s/he may have experienced, decentering the monsters and marvels in the process and replacing them with religious instruction.(156)

These endings, though, are not present in the original *Wonders*, only in the two later *Marvels* texts. This might be taken to suggest a strong desire by their authors to Christianize of the *Wonders*, to impose a restraining force to combat the *Wonders'* unadulterated focus on the monstrous and wondrous. While Verner's conclusions are true of many of the texts, this very strong counter-example calls into question the overarching, developmental model she builds upon it.

Verner's third chapter turns to the *Bestiary*, a text of great popularity, particularly in England. For the *Bestiary*, unlike the more Spartan *Wonders*, "first, the animal's name is given, often followed by an etymological explanation linking the name to the animal's behavior. Then the animal's physical appearance and behavior are described. Lastly, as in the *Physiologus*, the *Bestiary* derives a moral from the animal's behavior." (95) She is

absolutely correct that “the *Bestiary*’s moralities often exhibit a sophisticated multilayer effect” though this is perhaps not as “indicative of the *late* medieval expansion of potential meanings,” (102, emphasis added) as it is a facet of the contemplative and interpretive practices of the whole of the Middle Ages. Again, it is in close readings of individual passages that Verner’s text shines. In her close analysis of corresponding passages for the flying fish in *Physiologus* and the *Bestiary*, for example, she demonstrates a shift in emphasis from salvation to profit, and a corresponding shift in the work as a whole from religion to secularism. (115-116) Strong as this discussion is, as with the *Wonders*, it is oddly missing any discussion whatsoever of the very prominent role of the images in the *Bestiary*, which for many “readers” would no doubt have been of equal or greater interest than the text.

The final chapter focuses on *Mandeville’s Travels*, a forged first-person eye witness account of a journey through the exotic east that became one of the most popular works of the late Middle Ages, surviving in 250 manuscripts. Where the earliest texts left the monsters largely un-interpreted, and the high medieval texts provide didactic religious meanings, she argues, *Mandeville* interprets more freely. Again, it is in a discussion of the veracity of the accounts that Verner strikes gold, noting that utterly spurious *Mandeville* was widely accepted as accurate into the Renaissance, whereas the genuine travel account of Marco Polo was more commonly dismissed. “Of importance here,” Verner writes, “is neither the identity of ‘Mandeville’ himself nor the blameworthiness of his plagiarism but rather the incredible popularity and authority the *Travels* enjoyed, which indicates something important about the constitution of the late medieval mindset.” (124) It is *Mandeville*’s timely interest in the relations between Paganism and Christianity, which are neither simple nor one-sided, that creates the frisson of the text. Here:

the monsters ... are ubiquitous and various, but by no means uniform in their functions and meanings. Like the rest of the text, the monsters potentially have multiple meanings—religious and secular—and occasionally have no ‘meaning’ or signification at all. (143-144)

However, again her lack of reference to visual culture hampers Verner’s argument. She writes, “Mandeville’s monsters, while purporting to be observed and verifiable ‘facts,’ result from an intensely literary accumulation and re-writing and not from anything the author might have seen and simply reported.” (156) While there is much truth in this statement, there is also an alternate possibility for the author of *Mandeville’s Travels*; he would indeed *have* seen and reported at least some of his monsters. He would not have seen them in the flesh, of course, but would have been inundated by the vast number of artistic representations of monsters which, by the mid-fourteenth century were not only found in manuscripts of every type, but were also to be seen in architectural sculptures (sacred and secular), misericord carvings, stained glass, tapestries, small personal items, pilgrimage badges, wall frescoes, and more or less any other medium of artistic expression. While I would not underplay the role of the literary sources which, ultimately, lay behind all of these visual representations, we should likewise not discount the importance of the visual on the literary tradition, even in the earlier material.

In her conclusion, Verner first finds a “trajectory” that “appears to be a progressive one.” (155) “Patristic and Anglo-Saxon monsters, despite what their physical appearance might lead one to think, represent stability and order through their inevitable connection to a Higher Power.” This reading, though, is only possible if the *Wonders* and its images are passed over, as they are highly destabilizing. The *Wonders* is consequently left out of this summary paragraph that creates a falsely developmental model, moving from stability to fluidity. She then backtracks, saying that this is only an *apparent* progression, and that there

are four elements common to monsters in all of these texts. In this passage, Verner seems very close to Jeffrey Jerome Cohen's "Monster Culture (Seven Theses)," in *Monster Theory: Reading Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996). Verner writes that monsters are "always a sign of something else," and "always literary endeavors." (156) Cohen writes "The monstrous body is pure culture. A construct and a projection, the monster exists only to be read." (4) Verner continues that the monster is "a vehicle for human introspection." (156) Cohen writes at greater length, "The monster is difference made flesh, come to dwell among us ... The monster is an incorporation of the Outside, Beyond—of all those loci that are rhetorically placed as distant and distinct but originate Within." (7) Verner's final element is the peripheral nature of monsters. This, too, is covered by Cohen:

From its position at the limits of knowing, the monster stands as a warning against exploration of its uncertain demesnes ... The monster prevents mobility (intellectual, geographic, or sexual), delimiting the social spaces through which private bodies may move. To step outside this official geography is to risk attack by some monstrous border patrol or (worse) to become monstrous oneself. (12)

As Cohen's article was published five years before Verner's dissertation, and nine years before her conversion of it into a book, such strong overlap without any citation is troubling. Perhaps it is her strong aversion to theoretical approaches (which she considers "clearly temporally biased") that caused her to miss this important predecessor. Regardless, it is fascinating to see that their widely divergent approaches produced, by and large, the same conclusions.

In her discussion of *Mandeville*, Verner comments that "meaning has become fluid and dependent on perspective or situation, rather than fixed." (153) Her otherwise strong work might have found more solid footing if she had used this medieval wisdom to guide her approach, avoiding her frequent generalizations and sweeping conclusions. She notes that in "the visual depiction of the monster on mappaemundi ... the monstrous races are always confined on the edges of the world with Jerusalem at the center." (158) But, of course, being monsters, they defy this characterization, as well, roaming out of the margins and toward the center on the Hereford Mappaemundi and others. Likewise, Verner provides a wealth of information and many provocative ideas, but as her argument progresses, troubles creep inward from the periphery, eventually encroaching upon its center.
