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The English Hereford map (c. 1300) is a sumptuously illustrated and golden lettered vision of creation drawn onto a single piece of vellum, measuring 1.58 by 1.33 meters, and containing 1,091 written inscriptions. But this richly produced map has long been supposed to contain a grave error: the continental names AFFRICA and EUROPA, written in large golden letters in the map’s western half, have been reversed. (Fig. 1) Consensus regards the reversal of these names as a monumental error, committed by a careless or unsupervised limner at some late stage in the map’s production. In this compelling book, Marcia Kupfer asks us to see intention where others have seen error or confusion. The reversal of these names, she contends, is not an error, but rather initiates the map’s engagement with its major perspectival conceits, those of the *specula*, watchtower, and *speculum*, mirror. The great golden legends AFFRICA and EUROPA, which so obviously contradict the geographical depictions underneath them, conform with the discernment *per speculum* of Christ, whose perspective on the map, from his throne at the map’s apex, is the mirror image of our own. (Fig. 2)
Kupfer rehabilitates the map as an exploration of optical conceits and perspectival games widespread in medieval thought. The mirror conceit signals the map’s mimetic fidelity while at the same time cautioning its viewer against mistaking the reflected image for the thing itself. Furthermore, contends Kupfer, the map demonstrates that humanity itself is under surveillance, thematising the speculative encounter between Christ and the map’s communities of viewers awaiting divine Judgement.
The book’s nine chapters are arranged into three parts. In Part One, Kupfer examines the circumstances of the map’s medieval display. The ‘Hereford Commission,’ as Kupfer calls it, amounts to more than just the map, but includes the whole visual field in which it was encountered by medieval viewers. In Chapter One, she situates the map, complete with its backboard and painted doors, in the south choir aisle of Hereford Cathedral, where it would have been seen alongside the recumbent effigies of Hereford’s former bishops. Chapter Two considers the map’s own account of its conception, with attention to the Anglo-Norman donor inscription that attributes its ‘compassing’ to Richard of Haldingham. Kupfer examines how the Anglo-Norman verb *compasse* ‘enters into the work’s poetics’ (p. 31), so that the creation of the map parallels that of its divine model, the world, by the Creator with his compasses. In Chapter Three, Kupfer shows how sculpture and pictorial imagery are mutually implicated in the visual experience of the map. Specifically, she explores the map’s relation to an ongoing attempt at Hereford Cathedral, orchestrated by Bishop Richard Swinfield (1282-1317), to promote the veneration of his immediate predecessor, Thomas.
Cantilupe. With attention to scholastic distinctions between the natural and the supernatural, she shows how the map, on display on the south side of the cathedral, was an illustration of nature juxtaposed with the saint’s tomb at the north side of the cathedral, which was being cultivated as a focus for miraculous events surmounting nature. The map, argues Kupfer, is a visionary marvel that reveals how ‘miraculous action breaks into the world according to the mysterious will of God’ (p. 48).

Part Two engages the specular conceits that underlie the map’s design, the *specula*, watch tower, and the *speculum*, mirror. In Chapter Four, on the watch tower, Kupfer examines specular relations between the map’s most prominent landmarks, the Tower of Babel and Jerusalem. Kupfer contrasts Babylon’s elevation (Fig. 3), which towers in the map’s depiction of Asia, with the plan view of Jerusalem at the map’s centre to examine how the map structures perspective (p. 68). She contends that the reversal of the map’s
continental names conforms with Christ’s line of sight, knowingly transposed by the map’s creators onto our own view of the world. Chapter Five elaborates on the map’s commentary on vision by drawing attention to the mirror depicted near its middle. In the Mediterranean Sea, a mermaid holds a mirror turned to face the map’s viewer, establishing what Kupfer describes as a *mise-en-abyme* central to the map’s sustained and programmatic specularity. Kupfer’s sees that the siren’s gaze is not fixed on her mirror, but on the young rider in the map’s lower right corner. (Fig. 4) The rider who looks back on the world, meeting the siren’s gaze, is drawn alongside the inscription *passe avant*, ‘go forward’, usually interpreted as an invitation to explore the map’s contents. Kupfer demonstrates how the map’s sustained specular conceit threatens the beholder’s spiritual delusion: will the boyish rider succumb to earthly seductions, represented by siren and her mirror, or will he *passe avant*? Kupfer’s
compelling interpretation of this scene, grounded in scrupulous examination of the specular motif in art and literature, imagines the map as a commentary on the possible dangers of seeing and the distinction between illusory and spiritual truth.

Chapters Six and Seven are geometrically-guided readings of the map’s pivotal sites, namely Jerusalem and Babylon, revealing the optics that underlie the its spiritual vision. A focus on these features enables Kupfer to call attention to the ways in which the map configures the mutual gaze of its human and divine subjects, from Christ at the map’s apex to the map’s beholder. The map, she shows, is not simply a device for the archiving and transmission of geographical lore, but rather mobilises its geographical vision to explore, as she puts it, the reciprocity of human and divine speculations.

Part Three outlines what Kupfer’s describes as a perspectival genre. In Chapter Eight, she examines the proliferation of the T-O as an iconographic motif and surveys the corpus of simple T-O maps that exhibit the reversal of continental names. Chapter Nine examines the genealogy of the reverse T-O, while drawing illuminating parallels from the artistic traditions surrounding St Benedict’s vision, which was sometimes granted visual expression using the iconic shorthand of the T-O map. Kupfer demonstrates that these mirror images distinguish between the exalted perspective of God and his saints and those who possess the mere picture of this vision.

This book’s proposition is that design warrants, at the very least, as much consideration as carelessness in thinking about the map’s supposed ‘errors.’ Kupfer elevates the map in places where others have seen flaws in its execution, showing that the map’s supposed ‘errors’ are accommodated by an internal logic driven by the map’s commentary on perspective and seeing. Kupfer really excels in close readings of the map, and her astute interpretations are likely to become the new standard. Kupfer demonstrates that scholarship has largely missed the point of the map, focusing on its depiction of the world’s places.
without recognising the ends to which this geographical vision was deployed. The map emerges as a lively witness to contemporary discourses on optics and specular devices developed in literature and medieval scholasticism. This book is especially impressive in its ease in situating the map in its combined literary and art historical contexts; Kupfer’s scrupulous materialist analyses of the map and its wider visual environment are illuminated through comparison with diverse literary and scholastic texts that thematise sight and the language of vision. As such, her informed and careful readings will have resonance far beyond those with interests in the history of cartography and related visual and artistic cultures. Kupfer’s interpretations of the map are complex and subtle, but so too, crucially, is the map she illuminates. Everyone agrees that the map is exceptional, but Kupfer’s impressive book allows it to be so.