

Peoples from the East, Monsters from the West

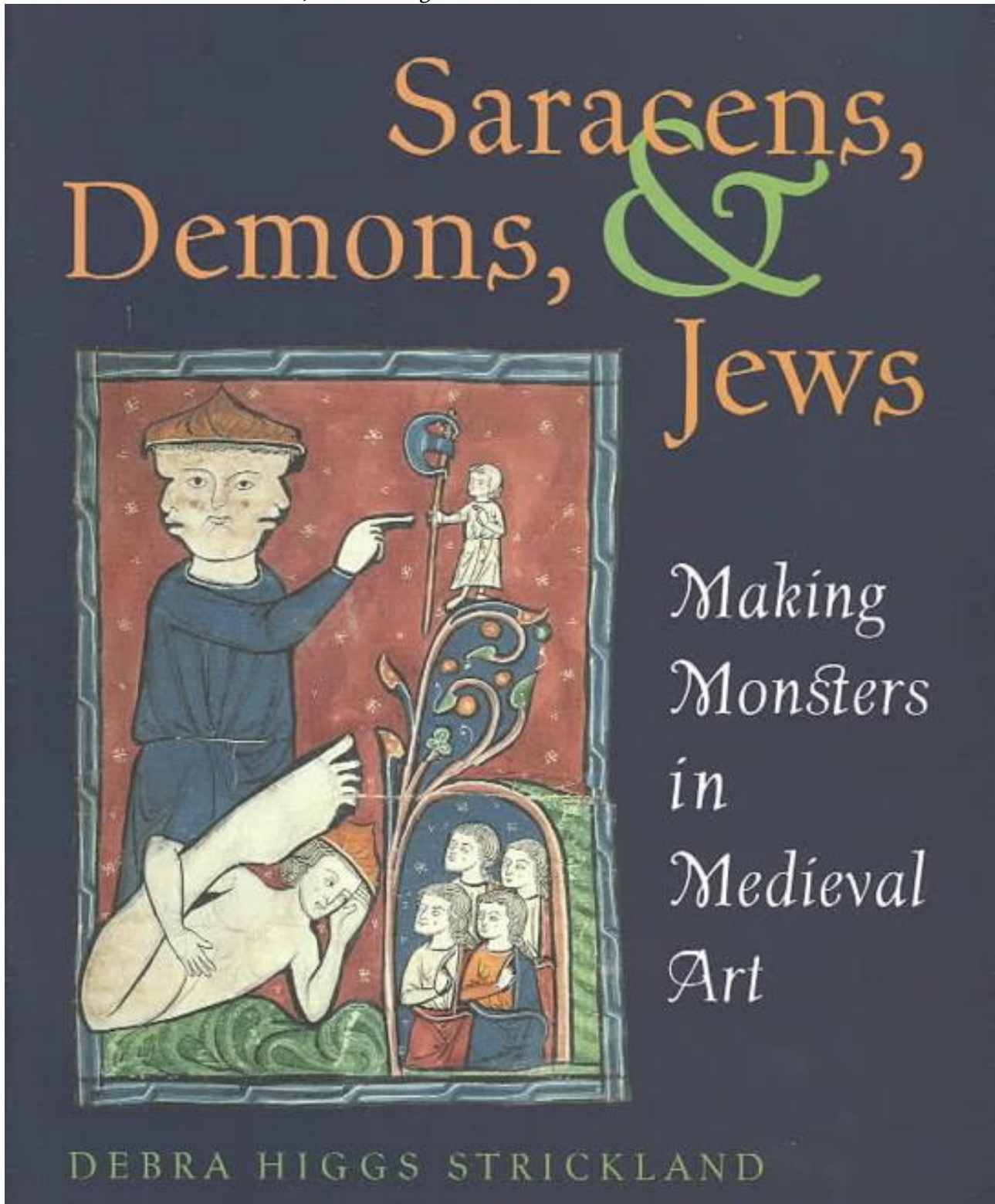
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The Middle Ages has traditionally been constructed as a foil or a counter-model to other periods. In our days, it could be considered as a white, Christian, phallogocentric, anthropocentric society in which the seeds of the most serious problems affecting our society were germinating¹. Such a view is not entirely absurd. It is clearly our job as historians to question such a past in the light of our present, which is legitimate, important work.

¹ For a possible starting point of this view of the Middle Ages, see Lynn White Jr.'s canonical essay, « The Historical Roots of our Ecologic Crisis », *Science* (10 March 1967), p. 1203-07.

In this context, the archeology of our relations to otherness, racism and xenophobia is of central importance². Medieval art historian [Debra Higgs Strickland](#) makes a particularly important argument in her book, *Saracens, Demons, & Jews. Making Monsters in Medieval Art*³.



² C. De Miramon, « Noble Dogs, Noble Blood: The Invention of the Concept of Race in the Late Middle Ages ». In *The Origins of Racism in the West*, eds. M. Eliav-Feldon, B. Isaac and J. Ziegler, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2009, p. 200–216

³ D. H. STRICKLAND, *Saracens, Demons, & Jews. Making Monsters in Medieval Art*, Princeton and Oxford, 2003.

that can be summarized very briefly as follows: different forms of otherness, such as religious or cultural otherness, were represented by Jews, Muslims, foreigners and Orientals, among others; during the Middle Ages they were considered in general to embody real monsters, at the extreme limit of humanity – on the edge of inhumanity.

There is much evidence supporting this argument. Strickland begins her book by quoting a medieval text that describes peoples of the East:

*« In the eastern part are men,
horrible, vile, villainous, and bad,
who do not dwell in towns,
but in deserts and mountains.
They have very strange faces,
and are men above their waists,
but animals in many strange ways below.
Cruel, bad, stinking, and fierce,
they are born from adultery »*

Strickland asks :

« During the Middle Ages, is there really any conceptual distinction to be drawn between, say, an Onocentaur and a Muslim, given that both were perceived by the Christian majority as ‘cruel, bad, stinking, and fierce⁴? ».

This hypothesis is interesting, but one, I would like to show, that falls into a trap of sorts. A trap set 700 years ago... What is this trap?

One day, in Paris, my friend and colleague Maud Perez-Simon and I consulted this supposed xenophobic manuscript in the National Library of France.

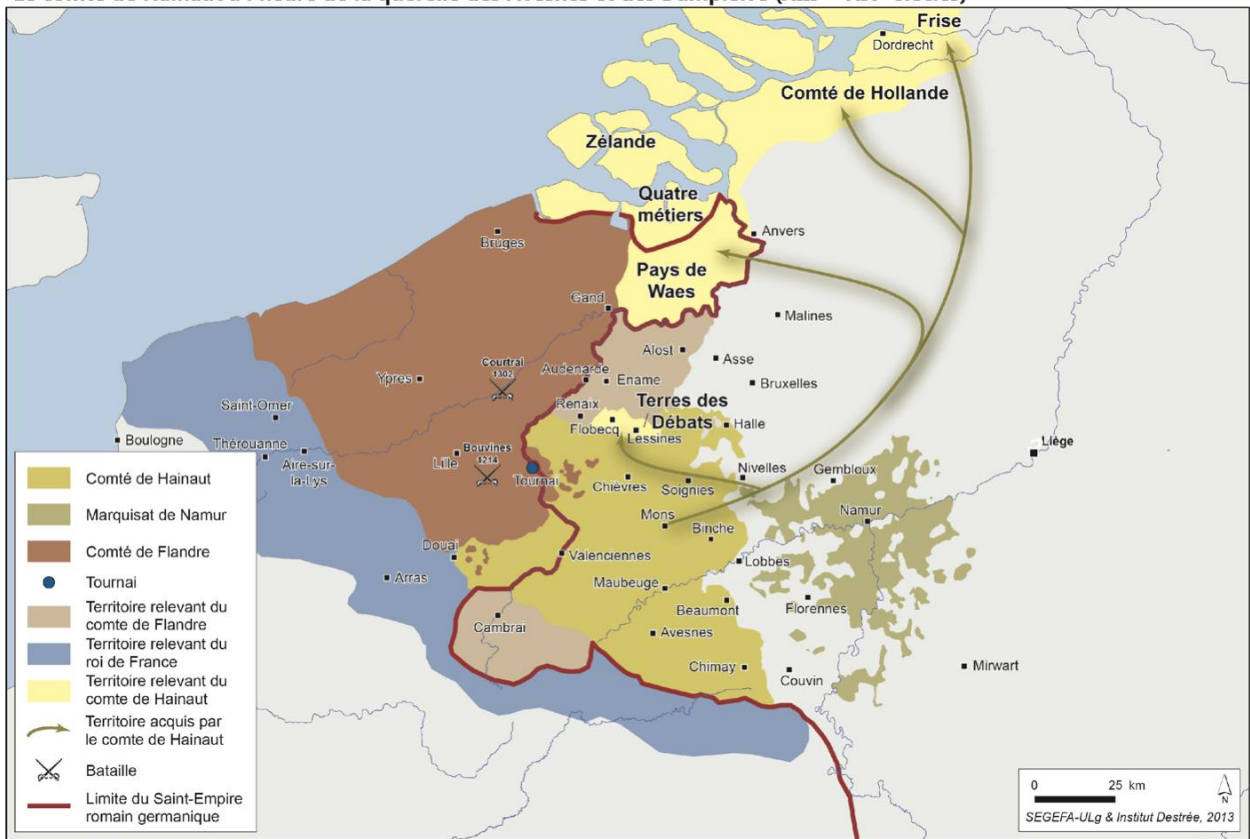
⁴ idem, p. x.



This is a little book of monsters, a manuscript of 18 folio pages, that, in fact, is the first book of monsters written in French, at the end of the 13th century⁵. It was written in northern France, 100 kilometers from Calais where, today, there are many migrants from Syria, Afghanistan and Eritrea getting by on the edge of the city in the area known as the “Jungle”. This text was never quoted or copied during the medieval period. The person who composed it wanted to remain anonymous, at a time of protracted war, in a region torn apart by conflicts between different powers.

⁵ Paris, Bibliothèque de France, f.fr. 15106. All images are from this manuscript, and translations of text my own.

Le comté de Hainaut à l'heure de la querelle des Avesnes et des Dampierre (XIII^e – XIV^e siècles)



Atlas de la Wallonie, de la préhistoire à nos jours



This book describes the classical monstrous peoples of the East, especially of “India”, including: the *Cynocephalic* peoples with a head of a dog but with a human voice; the sciopods, a people born with a single foot that they use as an umbrella of sorts to cover their heads; the hermaphrodites – who are supposed to live in France –, and many types of cannibals. These monsters and their images are commonplace in the Middle Ages; all of them are described as horrible and brutal.





In maps of the same period, these monsters from the margins of humanity are situated at the margins of the known world. There is a direct link between geography and ontology.



This discourse is very common. In this manuscript, it is given as a guarantee on the first page, but only on this page. If we read the text right through to the end, we discover that according to the author, once we consider the world as it is known, the real monsters are found here, in the West. Let's examine the chapter about cannibals that begins with this classic image.

q̄ ce saule acier tel dargen



Pour tel gent a b̄ senefie
q̄ al doit poi p̄ lier sa me

Following this image and one of St John the Baptist, an even stranger one appears:



We see here a scene of nobles feasting. At this point, the text changes its tone, and the author addresses the reader directly:

"Is there anyone who has power over a poor man,
who does not devour him as we see, *before he has been killed?*
He eats his members one by one
until he has eaten them all, even *before* the poor man is dead.
Let me be cursed if it's not true that one cannot
do worse than *the monsters shown on this page.*"⁶

The image changes register. The nobles represented here on the page, correspond to the readers themselves: they all become the real monsters.

"The lord devours the peasant,

⁶ The picture is located beside this text on the same folio page.

*the poor children die of hunger!
Lords, you who eat human flesh,
I fear that it will poison you!
Lords, who eat the flesh of people,
this is madness, neither beautiful nor noble! "*



The reversal is scandalous: if the monsters at the margins of the world are horrible because they eat the flesh of the dead, the monsters of the West are even worse because they devour the living. In this case, as happens often in the manuscript as a whole, the description of eastern culture is a pretext for denouncing the monstrosity of the reader.

How to interpret this amazing text? It is important to note that we are shifting from an ontological conception of the monster (I am a monster because of the place where I am born, because of my body) to an ethical conception of the monster (I am a monster because of what I do), one disconnected from appearance. In fact, throughout the rest of the text, we are confronted with a political conception of the

monster. It is our system of politics that creates monstrous ways of life. Moral responsibility is thus not attributed to the individual, but to the collective, to the system and its consequences. The monsters in this manuscript are always political ones.

Here we encounter a xenophobic discourse enlisted to create a new kind of voice. The aim is to give voice to a critique of feudal society that is practically unheard of. We interpret it as a subaltern voice.

Such a reversal of the monstrous, of margins and center, is not entirely original. Jacques de Vitry, the bishop of Palestine who is the main reference in our text, showed a radical relativism in his *Historia Orientalis*. According to Vitry, there is neither center, nor margin, but a single creation that is necessarily harmonious:

*"Indeed, cyclops who have only one eye, would be surprised when confronted by those who have two eyes, just as we would be if we met one of them or a person with three eyes. While we may consider black Ethiopians unattractive, among the Ethiopian people themselves, the blackest is considered the most beautiful. There are many phenomena in our lands which do not astonish us, but would appear astounding to peoples in the East were they to hear of them. They too would refuse to believe."*⁷

Folding the margins together

The literature of the Middle Ages is clearly one of the numerous origins of contemporary xenophobic discourse; yet this kind of manuscript – even if very rare, and even less well known – also shows that in a society based on mechanisms of particularly violent discrimination, there are voices raised that articulate a critical, counter discourse. They invite readers to think about the founding causes of such discrimination, as well as the moral and political forms they take. They also prompt thinking about solutions for current problems. Coming from a world defined by such brutal binary oppositions as center/margin, us/them, these voices ask us to fold the margins together to make the center.

⁷ Jacques de Vitry, *Historia Orientalis*, op. Cit., P. 299.