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Good versus Evil: Representations of the Monstrous in Thirteenth Century Anglo-French Apocalypse Manuscripts

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This paper examines one of the oldest ideological conflicts of all time: that between the divine powers of good and evil in the Book of Revelation, as represented in thirteenth century Anglo-French apocalypse manuscripts. Using a theoretical framework based on medieval conceptions of the monstrous and the monstrous body, this paper will explore contrasting representations of moral ideology in three different Apocalypse manuscripts (the Trinity Apocalypse, the Douce Apocalypse, and the Getty Apocalypse), arguing that the monstrous body is employed throughout these manuscripts in order to delineate between the forces of good and evil.

In depicting St John's apocalyptic visions of the end of days and the final epic battle between God and his army of angels and the forces of evil, Revelation is a text which can easily be interpreted as an allegory or embodiment of the dichotomy or "near dualism" of good and evil (Poesch 60). Each figure has its mirror image: God and Satan, Jesus and the Antichrist, the Archangel Michael and the Beast, the Woman clothed in the Sun and the Whore of Babylon. This symmetrical construction concretises the opposing sides of good and evil for the reader and emphasises their fundamental differences. Mireille Mentré argues that while in our modern times, we are obsessed with exploring and understanding the side of evil in our considerations of the fate of the world, medieval people "emphasised instead the good and the coherent..." ("mirent au contraire l'accent sur le bien et sur le cohérent..."; my translation, 14). To what extent, however, is this true? Did medieval portrayals and examinations of the end of days focus on the good, or were they just as curious as Mentré claims the modern age is in depicting the monstrous and the wicked? This article aims to contest Mentre's statement by exploring the medieval representation of the Apocalypse through its depictions of the monstrous and sinful. By approaching these texts with an emphasis on the creatures which they supposedly marginalize, both the centrality of the monstrous and the conflict in ideology between the monstrous and non-monstrous become clearer. In order to examine this conflict, we must turn to the most popular representation of the Book of Revelation in the Middle Ages, the Apocalypse manuscripts, in order to discover how they approached opposing portrayals of good and evil.

Apocalypse manuscripts are illuminated manuscripts which depict the events of the Book of Revelation accompanied by the original Biblical text, as well as a commentary which clarifies and elaborates on the often cryptic and puzzling visions recounted by St John. There are a number of well-known Apocalypse manuscripts dating from the Early Middle Ages. Spain in particular was producing Apocalypses as early as the ninth century, featuring the commentary of Beatus of Liébana, while the Northumbrian monk Bede wrote his own commentary on Revelation in the eighth century. It was not

until the thirteenth century, however, that the tradition of Apocalypse illumination was established in England and France. Henceforth, the texts appear to have been produced with little consideration for these previous models, particularly where commentary is concerned, for these Anglo-French examples feature instead the commentary of Berengaudus. The sixteen manuscripts which remain from the key production period c. 1250-75 have been divided by scholars into five distinct groups: the Morgan-Bodleian-Paris group, the Metz-Lambeth group, the Westminster group, the Eton-Lambeth group and the lone Trinity Apocalypse. For the purposes of this article I will be focusing on three manuscripts in particular: the Douce Apocalypse and the Getty Apocalypse, both of the Westminster group, and the Trinity Apocalypse. These three manuscripts are considered some of the most important and impressive examples of their tradition; furthermore, the styles of all three are distinct from each other, which yields interesting comparative results.

How do these three manuscripts portray the struggle between good and evil as described in Revelation, and to what extent does the monstrous play a role in this portrayal? Indeed, what does the "monstrous" even denote in this context? Monstrosity in the Middle Ages revolved mainly around concepts of deformity and hybridity. Christopher Dell discusses the influence of Pliny's *Natural History* on the medieval perception of monsters; deformed creatures are abundant in Pliny's text, such as the dog-headed humans known as Cynocephalae, the Sciapods with their single large foot extending above their heads, and many other beings often breeding together to create "monstrous mongrels, half beasts and half men…" (180). It has been established that Pliny's *Natural History* was well received in the Middle Ages – as evidenced by the fact that there are nearly two hundred manuscripts extant today – and was considered the seminal text in the field (Gudger 270). It is thus extremely probable that his correlation between the monstrous and the hybrid and deformed would have shaped medieval thinking on this topic. Bettina Bildhauer and Robert Mills examine the implications of this thinking: as deformity or hybridity were seen to transgress the norms of the body, it therefore followed that they also transgressed the boundaries of social convention, and were thus "vilified and excluded…" (75). The monstrous became equated with the transgressive and the evil, and was often contrasted with the non-monstrous and benign, in order to establish a fixed dichotomy between the two and, by extension, between good and evil. Other contemporary texts supported this attitude: *De Secretis Mulierum*, for example, claimed that by subverting the accepted boundaries of the body by adding or taking away body parts or warping existing ones, the monstrous presented a "direct challenge to divine order…" (Bildhauer and Mills 14), highlighting the threat that monstrous beings posed to both God and society.

It is not only the form of the being which is key in reinforcing its monstrosity, however, but also its position, whether spatially or temporally. Michael Camille explores this idea at length, emphasising the marginal nature of monsters. This marginalisation relates to Bildhauer and Mills's idea of the monster being vilified and excluded and therefore pushed to the edges of society for, as Camille discusses, "during the Middle Ages, the edges of the known world were at the same time the limits of representation…" (14) – hence the many *mappae mundi*, including the thirteenth-century Ebstorf map, which feature monstrous races such as cannibals on their outer edges. This marginalization of monstrosity extends to general manuscript illumination, where the monstrous and the grotesque are

often found within the margins. Bildhauer and Mills expand upon this idea by arguing that the monstrous can be found in multiple margins, including on the extreme limits of time. Thus, it is fitting that the Apocalypse – being the end of the world's timeline – is filled with monsters (Bildhauer and Mills 14). Suzanne Lewis, too, underlines this notion, arguing that by standing on the margins of time and space, monsters "mark the outer thresholds…" (Lewis "Encounters" 2), including again the thresholds of morality. It is obvious how relevant medieval notions of monstrosity are to the Book of Revelation. Not only do the events of the Apocalypse take place at the limits of the human timeline, but the defined boundaries between that which is good and that which is evil provide a threshold for medieval scribes and illuminators to depict the monstrous in relation to the transgressive and the immoral.

How then do these Apocalypse manuscripts depict the side of evil, in particular through a monstrous lens? In terms of hybridity, the seven-headed Beast described in Revelation maps perfectly onto this medieval notion of monstrosity; John describes it as a creature which "And the beast which I saw was like to a leopard: and his feet were as the feet of a bear, and his mouth as the mouth of a lion."[1] (*Latin Vulgate*, Rev 13:2). The manuscripts portray the horrific nature of the Beast in different ways. In folio 14v of the Trinity Apocalypse, brute violence is used, with each of the monster's seven heads turned in a different direction, attacking and biting the saints. While the saints, too, possess weapons, it is striking that their swords and sticks make little or no contact with the body of the Beast, whose monstrous mouths grasp indiscriminately onto the saints' limbs and heads. This serves to illustrate the helplessness of the saints in this scenario, and thereby underlines the frightening nature of the Beast. In folio 49 of the Douce Apocalypse, the Beast commands the focus of the miniature: on a purely spatial level, its body occupies the left half of the image, in direct contrast to the right half of the image, which only occupies the same space through multiple smaller figures. The Beast is therefore clearly portrayed as the more powerful, menacing force in this situation. This dominance is exacerbated by the beast's posture: unlike the depictions in the Trinity and Getty Apocalypses, in this miniature, all seven of its heads – teeth bared – rise well above the level of the worshippers and are facing the same direction, multiplying the beast's threatening, monstrous gaze. The upward tilt of its heads mirrors that of the worshippers looking up at it, which is perhaps intended to draw parallels between the monstrosity of the beast and the inherently monstrous nature of the heretics.

This correlation between monsters and humans continues in the depiction of the Beast out of the Earth. The description of this Beast in Revelation is extremely vague, leaving the illuminators with a greater degree of freedom in depicting it. In all three manuscripts, this second Beast is depicted in a quasi-humanoid fashion, standing or sitting upright with two arms and two legs, with only certain characteristics, such as cloven hooves, horns or fur, indicating its monstrous status. Its posture is often reminiscent of kingly representations in illuminations: in folio 52 of Douce, it wears a circlet upon its head, has its legs crossed and a hand commandingly outstretched, highlighting its authoritative

[1] Original Latin: "et bestiam quam vidi similis erat pardo et pedes eius sicut ursi et os eius sicut os leonis". Biblical verses in this article will be provided from the Latin Vulgate Bible, which is the version medieval illuminators would most likely have been familiar with.

presence. Rosemary Muir Wright argues that "the bestial aspects are kept in tension with the human, forcing the reader to see both aspects at once…" (129). Thus, by mixing the human with the bestial, it is possible the illuminators of these Apocalypse manuscripts were attempting to warn the reader of the dangers of sin and heresy by encouraging the reader to identify with the monster.

In juxtaposing the Beasts with humans, it becomes evident that the monstrous is frequently defined in relation to 'the normal' and 'the natural'. It is the reactions of the humans in the illuminations which emphasises the Beasts' monstrosity – in particular those of the devoutly religious, as it is they who are most likely to be offended by the immoral nature of the Beasts and whom the reader aspires to be like. Nigel Morgan discusses how this idea presents itself in the Getty Apocalypse through the figure of John. John is present either within or on the edges of many of the miniatures of this Apocalypse, observing the action, perhaps reflecting and emphasising his role within the Biblical text as witness and recorder of the Apocalyptic events. Within the Getty Apocalypse, however, as Morgan argues, his reactions are far more extreme than in representations in other manuscripts (*End of Time* 15): in folio 23r, John looks on as the Beast rises from the sea, an appalled expression on his face, and in folio 34v, John "gesticulates in horror…" (15) as frogs spew from the mouths of the three beasts. Morgan argues that this technique emphasises the "corporeal" nature of the visions; rather than remaining purely abstract, they become a physical reality and thus "draw the reader…into the action of the picture…" (15). In other words, the reactions of John reify the monstrous, making it all the more terrible and threatening.

The hybrid Beasts of the Apocalypse are not the only figures of evil to be found in Revelation. The most obvious other example is Antichrist, the ultimate figure of evil opposed to Christ. Although the term Antichrist only occurs five times in the Bible – in 1 John and 2 John – and never in Revelation itself, there was great interest in the figure during the Middle Ages and the Antichrist is key within medieval Apocalyptic depictions. Antichrist is discussed in Early Christian and ninth-century Apocalyptic commentaries, as well as in such influential texts as the *Libellus de Antichristo*, written by Adso, the Abbot of the Cluniac monastery in Montier-en-Der in 954 (Morgan *Douce* 16). How then was this prominent figure of sin depicted in the Apocalypse manuscripts in question? Jessie Jean Poesch claims that in general, the representation of the Antichrist in medieval illumination was somewhat ambiguous, with some depicting him as a tyrant, others as a tempter and deceiver of humans, and others still as "a man in whom Satan dwells, or…as the son of the devil…" (50). The Berengaudus commentary in the thirteenth-century Apocalypse manuscripts does, however, make its interpretation of the Antichrist abundantly clear for the reader, in stating beneath the image of the Beast rising from the sea in Revelation 13: "This beast signifies Antichrist". It continues in deconstructing various aspects of the Beast in order to prove its relation to Antichrist, declaring that "by the leopard, who is of various colours, are signified the hypocrisies of the Antichrist…by the bear, which is a very cunning animal, can be understood his cleverness in deceiving men…by the lion is signified his cruelty in tearing to pieces the people of God…" (Morgan *End of Time* 54). According to Berengaudus then, the hybridity of the beast not only highlights its monstrous nature, but also signifies its relation to the Antichrist. Berengaudus thus implicitly connects the Antichrist to monstrosity in all its medieval perceptions.

Rosemary Muir Wright similarly argues that, in representing the Antichrist as a man, medieval illuminators would have failed to signal his "malignity" and "otherness" (2) to the reader. The representation of the Antichrist thus becomes less concerned with accurately portraying the Biblical version of the Antichrist – albeit vague as it is – and more concerned with provoking the correct reaction of horror on the part of the reader. That is to say, "the imagery has to be seen as a set of visual responses to historical and social pressures by which artists portrayed this deceiver…in an inescapable confrontation with the viewer…" (2). The representations of the Antichrist as the Beast from the Sea in the Trinity and Getty Apocalypse are particularly interesting in this respect: both respond to the viewer's presumed fear of being at the mercy of the Antichrist by placing the Beast in a position of autocratic power. In folio 15r of Trinity, it stands on a draped table, calmly watching those who refuse to worship it being slaughtered; in folio 24v of Getty, the Beast is seated on a throne with its legs crossed in the "conventional pose of the wicked tyrant, visually confirming the commentary's identification of the beast with the Antichrist…" (Lewis *Reading Images* 136). Indeed, the Getty Apocalypse features a double representation of the Antichrist: in the images preceding the Sea Beast, the seven-headed dragon who terrorises the Woman clothed in the Sun bears an eighth additional head on its tail, in direct contradiction to the text. Many scholars interpret this head as being another representation of the Antichrist; in folio 20r, where the headed-tail sweeps a third of the stars from the sky, Lewis argues that this foreshadows the Antichrist's coming and hoodwinking of the brightest men of the time (119). Again, in order to wholly convey the Antichrist's inner monstrosity and terror, illuminators chose to represent him physically as a monstrous deformed body, reiterating the association between physical abnormality and evil.

Another manifestation of evil in Revelation which relates to the monstrous is the figure of the Whore of Babylon. Already within the scriptural text, the figure is connected with the monstrous: "And I saw a woman sitting upon a scarlet coloured beast, full of names of blasphemy, having seven heads and ten horns…"[2] (Rev 17:3). It is, however, not this physical link with the monster which makes the Whore of Babylon a monstrous figure, although it must be admitted that within the illuminations, her proximity to the hybrid body of the monster – she physically straddles it, whereas all other figures, including worshippers, maintain their distance – reflects her own monstrous immorality. Rather, it is the Whore's sexuality which is perceived as monstrous. Camille points out that sex was seen as shameful in the Middle Ages and was thus "marginalised in medieval experience…" (40). It therefore follows easily that the Whore's sexuality becomes a monstrous concept. Lewis argues that "the dominant thrust of the text focuses on the harlot's rulership over earthly kings through sexual domination…" (*Reading Images* 165). In folio 70 of the Douce Apocalypse, a reluctant John is pulled over to view the Whore, his hesitancy perhaps underlining the dangerous nature of her sexuality. Wright argues that in the Douce manuscript, the illustrator portrays the Whore as a member of the lower classes, in order not to offend the aristocratic sensibilities of the reader, while supposedly emphasising her undesirable state (203). In folio 36v of the Getty Apocalypse, the Whore is shown with her dress pulled scandalously above her

[2] Original Latin: "et vidi mulierem sedentem super bestiam coccineam plenam nominibus blasphemiae habentem capita septem et cornua decem."

knee and wine goblets littered about her, which recalls the text in Revelation that claims she will make the kings "drunk with the wine of her whoredom…"[3] and thereby facilitate the work of the Antichrist (Rev 17:2). Drunkenness, promiscuity and monstrosity are thus interwoven within her character.

Another aspect of the Whore's character which relates to medieval ideas of monstrosity is the source of her intoxication: the wine she drinks is the blood of the saints. This is reminiscent of the monstrous cannibalistic races discussed in medieval natural histories, which again can be found on the edges of *mappae mundi* such as the Ebstorf map. If we accept Bildhauer and Mills's definition of the monstrous as that which transgresses social norms, cannibalism can be seen as an ideal example of a flaunting of almost universal social taboos. By drinking the saints' blood, and by emphasising this fact in the illuminations of the Whore by depicting her drunk and surrounded by wine vessels, the Whore becomes all the more monstrous in the medieval imagination.

This, then, is how the side of evil is portrayed. What, however, of the side of good? What is particularly striking in the Book of Revelation is the key role the angels play in the dramatic action: to a great extent, the traditional figures of the Holy Trinity which normally denote divinity and the side of "good" are missing within both the text and the medieval illuminations. Rather it is the angels who act as agents of God, purging the land of evil and quite literally fighting his battles, as illustrated for example, by the episodes of the War in Heaven or the Defeat of the Beast. It quickly becomes evident that the angels described here are not the youthful, idealised variety popularised in Renaissance art, but rather mighty warriors sent to carry out God's bidding. Thus, although the horrors of the devastation by the agents of evil are vividly portrayed throughout the Apocalypse manuscripts, it must be noted that much of the destruction depicted is in fact at the hands of the angels, namely the blowing of the Seven Trumpets and the pouring of the Seven Vials. Mentré attempts to argue that within the Apocalypse manuscripts, in particular Douce, the destruction at the hands of the angels is glossed over, with the horror largely ignored (124). I argue that the opposite is in fact true: the Apocalypse manuscripts in question do not shy away from illustrating the terrible consequences of the angels' actions nor, more importantly, from drawing a clear link between the destruction and the angels' involvement in causing it.

In folio 24 of the Douce Apocalypse, which depicts the blowing of the second trumpet and the casting of a mountain of fire into the sea, the towering figure of the angel is shown, commanding the left half of the miniature, his body in a "vigorous contrapposto pose…" (Morgan *Douce* 58). This dynamic movement makes him dominate the miniature – and thus implicitly the events – while the angling of his trumpet towards the sea of fire draws a clear causal link between the two, emphasised by the mirroring of the colour red in his robes, the sea of blood, and the burning flames. Folio 25 shows a similar scene, with wormwood falling from the sky and poisoning the waters. Morgan argues that the grinning expression on wormwood's face suggests he takes pleasure in the harm he causes (59), which perhaps also reflects on the angel who is again angled towards the destruction he has caused. This

[3] Original Latin: "et inebriati sunt qui inhabitant terram de vino prostitutionis eius."

depiction of the angel, who is ultimately intended as a force for good but who nevertheless causes such horror, can be seen as undercutting the ideological conflict between good and evil, as it blurs the distinction between these two allegedly diametrically opposed forces. Yet, although the angels here are portrayed as violent and frightening, they are nevertheless never visually cast as monstrous, which keeps them in opposition to the beasts and evil creatures they are fighting.

In the Trinity Apocalypse, generally an altogether more serene manuscript, the destruction is not shown in such brutal ways, but the power and violence of the angels is nonetheless evident, namely in the scenes featuring the fight between the angels and the Dragon in folio 13v. The angels are placed in a position of control and power: Michael is standing upon the Dragon, indicating his dominion. The direct gaze between Michael and the monster creates tension through its direct confrontation, with the line of the gaze paralleled by the line of the lance piercing the Dragon's head; Michael is thus shown to be vanquishing the monstrous beast both mentally and physically. Although this scene is not as horrific as the blowing of the trumpets or the pouring of the vials – as it is the monster being defeated and not humans – it nevertheless portrays the terrifyingly destructive powers of the angels. Furthermore, this notion of control translates within the manuscript illumination into control over the narrative: in folio 36r of Getty, the angel is shown to be pulling John towards the Whore of Babylon and gesturing towards her, thus implicitly controlling how John – and by extension the reader – views the narrative.

James Kallas discusses the destructive nature of the angels within Revelation, arguing that although many consider Apocalyptic thought to be "the insistence that suffering does not originate in God, but in the God-opposing forces headed by Satan, the enemy of God…" (73), thus subscribing to the dualism of good and evil commonly seen as characteristic of Apocalypse manuscripts, a closer reading of Revelation reveals that, in fact, all suffering and ruin originates from God himself (78). It is He who commands the horsemen be sent out, He who orders the angels to blow the seven trumpets and pour the vials, and indirectly, He who allows Satan and his forces to wreak destruction. Whether this theological interpretation is true or false is irrelevant. What is relevant is whether or not it maps onto medieval thought on the topic. Did the extent of divine destruction fracture the medieval perception of the dichotomy between good and evil as depicted in the Apocalypse? I argue that it did not. Rather, as has been shown, the firm categorisation of the forces of evil as monstrous and thus undesirable and the depiction of the forces of good as ultimately victorious should lead us to believe that medieval scribes, illuminators and readers saw this final struggle in very black and white terms. Furthermore, it is important to note that often the victims of the angel's destruction are monsters, beasts, heretics, or unrepentant sinners, such as those branded with the Mark of the Beast, thereby allowing the destruction to adopt a tone of justice rather than one of horror. The power given to the angels in the Bible, and the portrayal thereof in the illuminations, is perhaps bestowed in order to give them equal status to the beasts in terms of force, and to thus give the reader comfort that good will ultimately prevail. Morgan makes a similar argument: in accounting for the popularity of Apocalypse manuscripts in the thirteenth-century, he claims that "the reader is left in no doubt that in the struggle between God and the Devil, the power of God is not only overwhelmingly superior, but also that God is always in control…" (*Lambeth* 26-27). Despite the sometimes horrific nature of the manuscripts, then, their fundamental

function is to illustrate how even the most monstrous of forces cannot triumph in the face of God's power.

Representations of the monstrous are vital within Apocalypse manuscripts in order to provide a foil for the forces of good to which the reader sought to aspire. Scribes and illuminators highlighted the frightening, depraved creatures and characters described in Revelation by translating the medieval perception of the monstrous as transgressive of social boundaries and norms into Apocalypse manuscripts. This was intended to then prompt the appropriate emotions of horror, disgust, and, inversely, devotion to God, on the part of the reader. Mentré's original argument is true to the extent that, while today, literature and art attempt to sympathise and understand the evil and the marginalised, medieval thought saw good and evil as a firmly established dichotomy and projected its own society firmly on the side of good. However, the vivid depictions of the monstrous in these manuscripts demonstrate the degree to which scribes, illuminators and readers were fascinated by the transgressive and the monstrous, while simultaneously being repulsed. Thus, throughout history, the monstrous has exerted its power over us.

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