WONDERS OF THE BEAST: MEDIEVAL MONSTERS AND XENOPHOBES

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Historical and literary records indicate that humankind, whether banded together in tribes or by nationhood, has tended to perceive those outside the group, or the "Other," as different or often as threatening and even evil. This attitude, combined with socio-economic factors, has contributed to the practice of one people's invading another. The fear of the Other shows clearly in much ancient Greek literature and travel literature. Greek and Hellenic conquerors such as Alexander the Great who invaded "exotic" countries, including India, directly or indirectly brought back stories of monstrous races who practiced barbaric customs. Such accounts often aim to justify imperialism of "uncivilized" peoples in order to tame them or to teach them "civilized" behavior. Alexander stories and related tales of marvelous races found their way onto the European mainland and circulated with apparent popularity and success well into the Middle Ages and beyond. By all accounts, not only classical, but also medieval peoples believed that India and Ethiopia, in particular, were inhabited by cannibalistic monsters who seemed more bestial than human. To complicate matters further, the presence of Christianity in medieval Europe brought with it an even greater sense of xenophobia. Now, the Other was not only a non-Westerner, but a non-Christian as well—a factor that partly influenced Crusader fever, and, as I shall argue, Renaissance voyage and discovery and even successive periods of imperialism and colonization.

In the 300's B.C., when Alexander invaded India and what he believed to be Ethiopia (Alexander believed that India and Africa were attached, and that he would find the source of the Nile attached to the Indus River), several accounts of these campaigns came out, written by soldiers, ambassadors, advisors, tradespeople, and scientists who supposedly accompanied Alexander on his trips (Arrian 301; Friedman 6). Alexander himself allegedly wrote a letter about the marvels he saw to his teacher, Aristotle (Gibb 33; Friedman 7). One of the extant versions of Alexander's pseudepigraphical correspondences is contained in a medieval manuscript dating from about 1000—Cotton Vitellius A xv., also known as the *Beowulf* manuscript. The letter describes a variety of strange and bizarre creatures, including dog-headed Cynocephali, Amazons, and giants (Gibb 127-84; Friedman 9-21). Alexander reacts to most of these creatures in a superior, imperialistic manner, and rarely with sympathy (Friedman 145). He describes his horror at seeing many of these races and tells us that several of the creatures either run from him or in some instances are antagonistic (Friedman 144). In the case of the latter, Alexander must fight back to subdue and overcome them (Friedman 145). Alexander justifies his conquering and even enslavement of these and other creatures based on their "bestial" and "aggressive" behavior.

Of the "monster" works in the *Beowulf* manuscript, the most bizarre creatures appear in *Wonders of the East* (Sisam 65-7). This is a medieval account of various creatures believed to inhabit India and Ethiopia. Three versions of the work remain extant—all of them produced in England between the 11th and 12th centuries and all of them illustrated. In *Wonders* we find a variety of monsters, including many of the same creatures described in the Alexander's letter. *Wonders* describes Cynocephali, Sciapodes

(creatures with one leg and one foot) Blemmyae (creatures with their faces embedded in their chests), Cyclopes, Panotii (a race of beings with ears long enough to use as coverlets at night), and a whole host of other oddities. As if these beings' appearances were not strange enough, we learn that their behavior, particularly their eating habits, is just as odd. Cynocephali breathe flames and eat humans, Homodubii eat raw fish, Hostes eat human flesh, and Donestre devour human bodies, but save the heads and weep over them. If the creatures are indeed human or part-human, their cannibalistic tendencies emphasize not only their outrageousness, but also their threat (Friedman 26-30). However, *Wonders* at least four times calls into question the humanity of several creatures. This doubt surrounds such races as the Homodubii, whose name means "dubious people;" the twenty-feet high, tri-colored, lion-headed race who "are thought to be human" (Gibb 104); the boar-tusked, ox-tailed women whom Alexander killed because "their bodies are foul and contemptible" (Gibb 109); and the wife-giving race whom "Alexander, when he came upon them, wondered about their humanity...[h]e did not [however] wish to kill them nor in any way to do harm to them" (Gibb 109). Apparently, Alexander decided he liked the wife-givers' custom of giving away women, human or not.

In *De civitate Dei*, Augustine speaks at length about the purpose of monsters in the scope of God's creatures on earth. Augustine first investigates whether monsters are human or not:

> concludam: aut illa, quae talia de quibusdam gentibus scripta sunt, omnino nulla sunt; aut si sunt, homines non sunt; aut ex Adam sunt, si homines sunt. (*Civitate* 16.8 *PL* 41 col. 487) (I shall only say: Either the accounts of the whole nation of monsters are valueless: or, if there are such monsters, they are not human; or, if they are human, then they have sprung from Adam). (trans. Walsh 504)

Noncommittal as he is about the human or non-human status of the races, Augustine comes to the conclusion that God created monsters and prodigies as part of his divine plan in order to teach humans a moral lesson (*Civitate* 16.8, *PL* 41 col. 487; trans. Walsh 504).

Since God is all-knowing and perfect, Augustine asserts, monsters and prodigies cannot possibly be errors. He concludes that they should remind us of the perfect structure of God's universe—everything is balanced by something else (*Civitate* 21.8, *PL* 41 cols. 722-23; trans. Walsh 363). According to Augustine, the monstrous races can teach us about sin and virtue in this world in preparation for the rewards and punishments awaiting us in the next. As Augustine notes in his etymologies of certain key words:

> Monstra sane dicta perhibent a monstrando, quod aliquid significando, demonstrent; et ostenta ab obstendendo; et portenta a portendendo, id est praeostendendo; et prodigia, quod porro dicent, id est, futura praedicant. (*Civitate* 21.8, *PL* 41 col. 722)
> (A *monstrum* (from *monstrare*, to point out) means a marvel that points to some meaning. So, *ostentum* (from *ostendere*, to show) and *portentum* (from *portendere* or *praeostendere*, to show ahead of time) and *prodigium* (from *porro dicere*, to declare things a long way off) all mean a marvel that is a prediction of things to come.) (trans. Walsh 362)

According to the Christian model, then, these monstrous races function more as objects for humans rather than as humans themselves. That is, they signify and so help humans to understand themselves and their own place in the cosmos. Moreover, the entertainment value of these creatures as marvels results further in their objectification and dehumanization—attitudes applicable to succeeding centuries of imperialism and colonialism. Certainly, the views propagated by the *Wonders of the East* tradition and the Alexander materials played a role in the attitudes toward non-Christian Middle Eastern peoples at the time of the Crusades.

Crusaders traveled to the Holy Land for a number of reasons, and propaganda, such as the promise of heavenly reward, played a major role in motivating many a Crusader. At work, too, was a propagandistic prejudice toward non-Christians promoted throughout Christendom. "Infidels" were threatening to claim the land of Christ as their own. By portraying the Saracens as dehumanized and monstrous, the Crusade organizers, mainly the Church, were successful in sending large numbers of Europeans off to the Middle-East to kill non-Christian enemies. Such an attitude about the Other is a direct legacy of Greek xenophobia as seen in *Alexander's Letter* and in *Wonders of the East.*

During the Renaissance such fearful and aggressive attitudes would still be prominent. For example, Velasquez told Cortes to look for Panotii and Cynocephali in his explorations (Friedman 199). Columbus was actually surprised to find that the natives of what is now Guyana were not physically monstrous, although he did find them barbarous and uncivilized and so acted monstrously toward them (Friedman 198). In the sixteenth century, Walter Raleigh, after his travels, acknowledged that many of the wondrous races were probably "mere fable," but he still believed that the Blemmyae existed (Gibb 37-8). Even as late as the seventeenth century, *Wonders* books were still being published, complete with detailed illustrations of the bizarre Eastern races (Wittkower 186-93). Perhaps people read these now with a bit more disbelief, but the fact remains that prejudicial views about non-Westerners were still being propagated. These attitudes prevailed well into the eighteenth century, when imperialism and colonialism, largely because of Social Darwinism, became the national pastimes of several countries, including Britain.

Of Victorian explorers and missionaries, Patrick Brantlinger says, "the great explorers' writings are non fictional quest romances in which the hero-authors struggle through enchanted or bedeviled lands toward a goal, ostensibly the discovery of the Nile's source or the conversion of cannibals" (176). Furthermore, "explorers usually portray [Africans] as amusing or dangerous obstacles or as objects of curiosity" (Brantlinger 176). Although this paper is meant to examine, primarily, medieval Western attitudes toward the inhabitants of the Eastern realms, one cannot overlook the fact that the prejudices inherent in ancient Greece are the roots of the xenophobic attitudes in Victorian England, and, indeed, in our society now. The similarities between Brantlinger's statement about Victorian explorers and the attitudes expressed in the Alexander materials regarding the savagery of Indians and Ethiopians are astounding. Remember that Alexander was also in search of the Nile. The concept of the Other, in these cases the inhabitants of countries outside the sphere of the Greek city-state, medieval Christendom, or Victorian Europe, has always existed and the peoples perceived as the Other have always been treated as not wholly human, if not monstrous, uncivilized,

and deserving to be conquered. Such xenophobia has been the result of fear of the unknown and the different combined with socio-economic needs to conquer other countries. Unfortunately, the legacy of these attitudes remains with us, but perhaps by better understanding the roots of our prejudices and fears, we can make headway toward conquering our own xenophobic projections upon others.

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MOHAMMED, COURTLY LOVE, AND THE MYTH OF WESTERN HETEROSEXUALITY

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Edward W. Said observes that Orientalism began its formal existence as a field of learned study during the Middle Ages, specifically, in 1312 with the decision of the Church Council of Vienne to establish a series of chairs in Arabic, Greek, Hebrew, and Syriac (49-50). As a polemical discourse, however, Orientalism starts earlier, some might say in