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Book Review: Mitchell B. Merback. *The Thief, the Cross and the Wheel*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999.

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Mitchell B. Merback. *The Thief, the Cross and the Wheel: Pain and the Spectacle of Punishment in Medieval and Renaissance Europe*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999. Pp 352. Illus.

This is an elegant, horrific, frustrating, and sumptuously illustrated book – 119 photographic reproductions, including 33 in full colour. In it, Mitchell B. Merback, an art historian at DePauw University, demonstrates that 'late medieval realist painters presented the sacred scene of the Crucifixion in terms of their own, but more importantly their *audience's*, experiences with criminal justice rituals' (21). The Crucifixion of Jesus himself is not the main focus here. Rather, Merback explores in excruciating detail the tortures apparently inflicted upon the two thieves crucified along with Jesus in a group of northern European paintings, mostly from southern Germany, from the fourteenth through sixteenth centuries. Where Jesus always hangs in the traditional cruciform manner from outstretched, nailed hands and feet, the figures of the two thieves in most of these paintings are highly contorted, tied over the crossbar in a 'broken-back posture' (172), their cut and broken legs dangling below them. Merback argues convincingly that the thieves are portrayed not simply as victims of crucifixion, a method of execution unused (for obvious reasons) by Christian authorities, but as having been broken on the wheel – a form of execution with which these painters, if not many modern readers, are likely to have been highly familiar. Merback writes, 'After hanging, breaking the body with the wheel was the most common form of aggravated execution from the early Middle Ages to the beginning of the eighteenth century' (158).

While the method varied, Merback refers almost exclusively to the dominant Germanic version, as described in this early sixteenth-century account:

> under the arms of the condemned man timbers are placed on the ground, and the executioner or a criminal breaks his arms with a wooden wheel, then breaks both his legs, and then with the same wheel breaks the man's back. Then broken and shattered, the man is raised on the wheel and set atop a large beam upright in the ground – there the wretch is left, breathing with difficulty. (158)

The phrase 'raised on the wheel' does not nearly convey the horror: the victim's shattered limbs were first woven through and around the spokes of the wheel. Sometimes – although Merback notes only that 'an iron rod or mace sometimes replaced the wheel as a bludgeon' (159) – the victim was simply tied to the wheel and clubbed there before being raised up. The overall effect was likely still the same: according to a 1607 account which Merback quotes, the victim

was 'transformed ... "into a sort of huge screaming puppet writhing in rivulets of blood, a puppet with four tentacles, like a sea monster, of raw, slimy and shapeless flesh ... mixed up with splinters of smashed bones"' (160–1), before being raised up to wider public view and a slow and painful death.

Merback holds this method of execution up to wider view, arguing its connections not only to the well-known literary and artistic motif of Fortune's wheel, but also, more problematically, to topics such as anti-Jewish violence in Austria and Bavaria in the same period. The coincidence is indeed striking; however, Merback makes more of it than the evidence can easily bear. He usefully compares 'the Bad Thief' who rejects Jesus with the historical figure of the unrepentant and punished Jew, noting, for instance, that several of the paintings he examines 'produce a kind of *enforced* occlusion of the Thief's vision of Christ either by turning the flanking cross in the opposite direction or by immobilizing the figure in such a way as to render the gaze impossible' (193). The Thief thus clearly serves, like the figure of Synagoga, as an allegory of the Jews' supposed spiritual blindness. Less useful is Merback's attempt to link this to the contorted and inverted posture of the Thief, and to the particular tortures inflicted upon contemporary Jewish bodies. In the first place, he gives no indication that Jews were more likely than others to be broken on the wheel, although he notes that Jews who were so broken were to wear 'a special "Jew's hat" (*Judenhüter*) [sic], filled with boiling pitch' (189); no such hat is worn in any of the pictures he offers, although distinctive hats commonly mark *other* Jewish figures in these and other paintings of the Passion from this period, as well as in portrayals of the execution of Jews. Merback argues that these painters mark Jewishness instead through 'a vital homology between our iconographic motif of the broken-back, upside-down Bad Thief and ... the custom of hanging Jewish criminals upside down' (189). Were this so, it would confusedly mark both thieves, not just one, as 'bad' Jews: as Merback himself notes, the repentant thief, too, often hangs in a broken-back posture. I am persuaded that this posture, and the portrayal of the thieves more generally, does indeed bear a relation to the tortures of the wheel, and to 'the juridicial violence of everyday life' (186), but not to any particular 'Jewish execution'.

Merback promises more than he delivers in other ways, as well. In chapter 2, for instance, he refers to archaeological evidence for a variety of actual Roman crucifixion techniques, adding parenthetically 'see Chapter 6' (69); however, the only such evidence he presents, pertaining to one form of crucifixion only, appears in a note to chapter 2 (316 n 22). His main point, that the technical details of actual crucifixion are largely irrelevant to the highly

standardized portrayal of the Passion, of course holds. Still, more such details – easily available in the wealth of recent 'historical Jesus' criticism, given only a brief nod on 22–3 – would be useful to his argument here. And that argument could be better laid out, and less repetitive. More space should be given to what Merback claims is worth discussion but doesn't discuss, and less to what he elsewhere states at length. In this and other respects the editors are likely much to blame. The book is littered with minor irritations, such as the overuse of italics for emphasis, and the often random-seeming inclusion of bracketted foreign words or phrases which add nothing, as on p. 64: 'In the distance are several German castles (*Schloß*)'.

Some problems are more serious. Compare the final quoted sentence of my first paragraph with this: 'After hanging, "breaking with the wheel" was the most common form of execution throughout Germanic Europe from the early Middle Ages to the beginning of the eighteenth century.' This almost identical sentence is from Robert Held's catalogue entry on 'Breaking with the Wheel', in *Inquisition / Inquisición* (Florence, 1985), 42, a page to which Merback refers in a subsequent note, and from which he later quotes – that is, the 1607 account quoted above, but with Held's substantial interpolation of the original German reduced to a brief phrase (161). Neither are his descriptions always accurate: on p. 228 he refers to 'a wicked child who makes the threatening gesture of drawing his finger across his throat' in the painting of the Ascent of the Cross by Guido da Siena; the finger in question clearly belongs not to the boy, whose hand is holding an upraised stick, but to Mary, directing him away from her son.

Merback states that 'Meditative practice meant learning to cast and direct the actors of one's inner Passion play', asserting the importance of the 'mutual dependence between the painter's and the spectator's efforts at visualization' (45), but largely ignores any role that theatrical presentations of the Passion might have played in these efforts, as well as any possible connection such presentations might have had to judicial spectacle. He also largely excludes discussion of judicial spectacle in other countries, and its possible effects on artistic renditions of the Passion. These are not damaging, but inviting exclusions. The wheel seems not to have been much used in England, although I have discovered a few references to its use in late sixteenth-century Scotland. Yet the single English illustration in this book, from an early fifteenth-century Book of Hours, shows both thieves hanging from arms stretched back over and behind the crossbar, like many others in this book, legs dangling, bleeding from wounds both above and below the knees – not the 'broken-back posture', but one that would seem to be associated with breaking on the wheel. Neither posture is one that could easily have been replicated by living actors. Some

variations, however, might well have been possible. Merback's book implicitly invites scholars of early theatre to question the presumption evident in modern restagings of medieval English Passion plays, that the thieves were crucified in the same manner as Jesus, and to delve more deeply into the ways in which crucifixions were staged, as well as painted, in continental Europe.

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Diane Purkiss (ed). *Three Tragedies by Renaissance Women*. Renaissance Dramatists. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1998. Pp xlvi, 199.

Three Tragedies by Renaissance Women, edited by Diane Purkiss for Penguin's Renaissance Dramatists series, is a timely addition to the available texts of early modern women's plays. Jane Lumley's *The Tragedie of Iphigeneia*, Mary Sidney's *The Tragedie of Antonie*, and Elizabeth Cary's *The Tragedie of Mariam* are here presented, for the first time, in old spelling and with a minimum of editorial interference, in keeping with the practice of this series. The plays have been meticulously edited from the three base texts (an authorial manuscript in the case of Lumley, dated to *c* 1553, the 1595 quarto of Sidney's play, and Cary's 1613 quarto) and are supported by a lengthy critical introduction, detailed information on dates, sources, and biographies, judicious commentary notes, and a complete textual apparatus. This is a rigorous, yet affordable, edition equally suited for use by students and all but the most specialist of scholars.

Although Sidney's and Cary's plays have already appeared in excellent separate scholarly editions and are available in the theatre-oriented anthology *Renaissance Drama by Women: Texts and Documents* (London, 1996), this volume is the first to treat them, together with Lumley's *Iphigeneia*, as plays belonging to literary and social traditions that are fundamentally unrelated to the early modern professional theatre. In so doing, Purkiss argues that certain working assumptions in recent criticism about these plays are inappropriate and even misleading: that authorship is a form of personal self-expression, that patriarchy prevented these women from writing great literature, that women playwrights avoided the public theatre for fear of being branded whores, and that these writers worked in isolation. Purkiss' quarrel with such assumptions is not that they have failed to generate interesting and provocative readings of the plays, but that they have foreclosed inquiries which might lead us better to understand what it meant *in the Renaissance* – as opposed to the nineteenth