
That the modern mind often reads torture as inextricably linked with the medieval world provides an impetus for the revisionist argument of *Torture and Brutality in Medieval Literature*. In this methodical, comparative work, Larissa Tracy challenges the dominant mythology of medieval torture, asserting that medieval literary representations of judicial violence were not mimetic, but rather served as a locus for cultural anxieties and ethnic antagonism.

The incisive introduction to this book considers how the word ‘medieval’ has been misappropriated in recent discussions of torture. Tracy notes that ‘The body in pain and its representation in art, literature and historical record have created a modern impression of the Middle Ages as barbaric, bloodthirsty and consumed with cruel desire’ (1). Attitudes to torture, Tracy asserts, are intricately bound up with questions of national identity; she presents the case of accusations of torture against the United States government by a detainee of Guantanamo Bay, and the categorical refutation by President Obama that “The United States does not torture”. ‘America’, Tracy asserts, ‘defines itself partly by its policy against torture — when that is undermined, the very identity of America is threatened’ (2). Not only does the introduction, then, add support to the argument that nationalistic concerns can be traced back to the Middle Ages, it also presents certain examples of how attitudes to torture were bound up with ethnographic and counter-hegemonic discourses of the period.

The first chapter, ‘Rending the Flesh: The Orthodoxy of Torture in Hagiography’, explores the array of tortures inflicted upon saints in the *South English Legendary* and the *Gilte Legende*, the fifteenth-century
Middle English translation of the *Legenda Aurea*. Here, Tracy examines the manner in which hagiographic literature provided a model of resistance for heterodox movements. Concerned in particular with Saints Christina, Laurence and Agatha, this chapter explores the gendering of representations of torture, and notes that ‘The “truth” inscribed on the bodies of these saints destabilizes all authority that attempts to contain and control the application of torture, disguised as a mode of discovery.’ (69)

The second chapter examines the manner in which continental Romances present tensions of cultural identity through depictions of torture and brutality, with these texts situating torture in the realm of that in opposition to which their own national identity is being defined. Here, discussion of the *Chanson de Roland* is particularly fruitful; the focus is firmly on Charlemagne’s punishment of Ganelon which, Tracy asserts, ‘creates a gulf in cultural identity between the Normans and the French, and taps into the anxieties of an audience caught in a mesh of cultural inheritance struggling against the “Other within”’ (88).

The third chapter investigates the treatment of torture in the Icelandic *Hrafnkels saga* and *Brennu-Njals saga*, and its connection with Old Norse construction of national identity. Here, Tracy notes that what is often referred to as torture in these texts is not, ‘but is instead brutality in the guise of judicial punishment masked as justice’ (113). She contrasts representations of torture with so-called ‘acceptable violence’ in order to emphasize its alterity.

The fourth chapter, ‘The Matter of Britain: Defining English Identity in Opposition to Torture’, is perhaps the strongest in a convincing and compelling book, examining the dichotomy between English prohibitions against interrogatory torture and the often extreme violence of its own literary texts. The opposition between civilized and just representations of homeland and the barbarism and brutality of the
Other is shown to be intensified in this tradition, and Tracy focuses in particular on the werewolf narrative of *Arthur and Gorlagon*, which, she suggests, elucidates ‘an underlying brutality in affairs of law and governance’. Other texts receiving detailed treatment here include *Havelock the Dane* and Chaucer’s *Prioress’s Tale*.

The fifth chapter is concerned with comic representations of violence in medieval literature, and focuses in particular on the cruel dispensation of justice in the fabliaux. This chapter has much to add to the current state of scholarship on medieval comedy, and it returns to the gendering of torture by reading the punishment of castration as a public display of power and control.

The sixth chapter traces the mythology of the brutal Middle Ages as it is subsumed into Early Modern culture. Representations of torture, this chapter demonstrates, continue to be linked with questions of identity (both national and doctrinal), and the medieval world now becomes the Other onto which these accusations of injustice and cruelty are superimposed, in order to critique the current system: ‘By rejecting the historical use of torture in literature and in plays, and demonizing its practitioners, early-modern authors also reject the resort to torture in sixteenth-century jurisprudence and question the stability of their world’ (291).

The value of this book rests not only in its redefinition of medieval attitudes to torture, but also in its consideration of modern attitudes to torture. Tracy suggests that it may be ‘easier to distance ourselves from the violence (and even torture) in the modern era if we can situate it firmly in the past and convince ourselves that we are not as violent as medieval society’ (11). The work demonstrates that medieval nations similarly employed representations of torture to define themselves in opposition to both past and Other. This book deftly traces both the history and historiography of medieval torture, provides a solid
theoretical foundation for the study that follows, and explores the possible multiplicity of responses to depictions of torture in the Middle Ages. Its wealth of detail and breadth of coverage ensure that it has the potential to become one of the seminal studies in the field.

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