In the introduction to this book, the editors tell us that it is a collection of essays that were originally given as papers at a symposium with same title in 2001. It notes that "[s]ome [of the essays] have since been revised and enlarged to their present form". (9) The volume comprises eight essays, each of which addresses the themes contained in the book's title in relation to different medieval texts (including maps), ranging in date from the early Middle Ages to the early modern period. Several of the contributors are known for their work on similar topics, such as Evelyn Edson, Naomi Reed Kline, John Block Friedman and Peter Dinzelbacher. The focus is on a wide range of European cultural productions, contexts and concerns.

The opening chapter is by Evelyn Edson, "Mapping the Middle Ages: The Imaginary and the Real Universe of the Mappaemundi" (pp. 11-25). Edson, author of monographs on this and related topics (for instance, Mapping Time and Space: How Medieval Mapmakers Viewed Their World[1997] and Medieval Views of the Cosmos[2004]), discusses a range of different medieval mapping practices and traditions, distinguishing between the ‘real’ and ‘imaginary’ features they represent before concluding that such a distinction is itself problematic in a medieval context. This is followed by another piece on maps, this time by Naomi Reed Kline, author of Maps of Medieval Thought: The Hereford Paradigm(2001). Kline’s piece is entitled “The World of Strange Races” (pp. 27-40) and offers a description of the different races and different kinds of monstrousness represented on the Hereford mappa mundi, distinguishing between Christian and non-Christian influences and material. John Block Friedman, author of, amongst other works, Monstrous Races in Medieval Art and Thought(1981), also contributes a discussion of medieval ideas of monstrousness in a chapter entitled "Monsters at the Earth’s Imagined Corners: Wonders and Discovery in the Late Middle Ages" (pp. 41-64). Friedman is here concerned with the “curious longevity of these medieval beliefs about exotic races” (42) into the Renaissance and concludes that the “relocation of the monstrous races to the New World was another way to deal with Renaissance colonizing impulses”. (58)

The next contributor, Peter Dinzelbacher, a prolific scholar, here writes at great length about “Die mittelalterliche Allegorie der Lebensreise” (pp. 65-112), addressing the literary treatments of life-as-journey under the subheadings of “Erdenpilgerschaft”; “Queste”; “Leiter”; “Brücke”; “Labyrinth”; “Dramatisierungen”; “Epilog”. Dinzelbacher traces the genealogy of this motif or framework from Roman and Greek antiquity through to its full flowering in the late Middle Ages and into the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. He concludes that the allegorical life-journey is shaped by what he sees as a typical medieval mindset, characterised by dependence on and deference to (transcendental) authorities.

One of the two editors, Rasmus Thorning Hansen, is the next contributor, with "Monsters and Miracles in Yvain " (or Ywain ,
overwhelming number of technical errors and inconsistencies suggest a certain cavalier disregard for the book's audience.

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Bernhard Meier is concerned with "Imaginary Journeys among the Celts" (pp. 161-72), and concludes that the Welsh and Irish narratives he has been discussing demonstrate a "tradition strongly grounded in prehistoric mythology, yet at the same time steeped in and thoroughly adapted to Christian theology". (170)

The collection concludes with a piece by the second editor, Leif Søndergaard, "Far West of Spain--The Land of Cockaigne" (pp. 173-208). Søndergaard discusses the Land of Cockaigne narratives as deliberate fabrications, presenting their audiences with excessive and topsy-turvy landscapes and primarily "designed to entertain and please ordinary people" (198) and "to provoke laughter" (198). He acknowledges that other readings are possible, citing the "moralistic trend that came up at the end of the 15th century' as a result of which the narratives could be regarded as critical of 'idlers'". (201)

The topic of the symposium and title of the book is a promising one. Medieval representations of monstrousness, travel and encounters with the other (interpreted in numerous ways) have provided the focus of much interest and and an ever-increasing amount of scholarship in the past two decades. This is due to a number of reasons, not least the productive critical paradigms offered by gender and postcolonial theory as well as interdisciplinary co-operation and contemporary socio-political and cultural concerns. This book promises to be a further stimulating contribution to this burgeoning field. It does not, however, live up to this promise.

It is difficult to discern the target audience from the tone of the collection, but I assume that it is aimed at an audience of students and academics. While the introduction states otherwise, there is very little to suggest that the essays have been reworked since being given as papers, an impression gained not least because several of them still address an audience constructed as a listening rather than a reading one. Additionally, there is no attempt to articulate an overarching framework or rationale for this collection in the introduction. As a result of this--and of other aspects, which I will address--the collection appears rather disparate, despite its shared theme(s).

Much of the material presented, while potentially interesting, takes the form either of a survey (of themes, topoi, textual variations) or of a series of descriptions and summaries rather than offering analyses or arguments. Too often rather basic or general statements are made about a particular text's importance or function without any discussion beyond the initial statement. The interactions between texts or themes and their respective cultural contexts are also left curiously underexplored; ambiguities are noted but not pursued or examined. The generic requirements of an oral conference presentation are quite different from those of a written piece of scholarship: it does neither the author nor the reader any favours if this is disregarded. The conclusions drawn are often disappointingly vague or inconclusive. To state that "we cannot help but learn more about the medieval mind" (24) or that one can see the "pervasive influence of Christianity on traditional pre-Christian concepts" (162) or even to offer a quirky 'epilogue' instead of a concluding argument (205) again raises the question as to what the collection is supposed to be achieving and whom it is supposed to be addressing. In addition, some of the material is not original: Naomi Reed Kline's contribution, for instance, is very similar to one of the chapters in her "Gebirgswildnis mit 'wilden' Frauen: Juan Ruiz' literarischer Streifzug durch die Sierra de Guadarrama" (pp. 145-60), focusing in particular on its bawdy representation of the narrator's encounters with monstrous 'wild women' and the underlying territorial and cultural anxieties these comic and grotesque moments mask.

A lack of engagement--and perhaps effort--is even more evident in the book's presentation. The editing is exceedingly poor--there is no consistency either in the collection as a whole, or even in individual pieces. For example, some illustrations are numbered incorrectly while others are not referred to at all in the respective textual discussion, so that readers are left to fend for themselves. Some pieces are rife with misspellings or errors of transcription and there is no consistency in referencing or presentation of bibliographical information. There are errors on almost every single page and on numerous pages there are several. There is no index or general bibliography, both of which would have made the volume not only more reader-friendly but would have indicated a shared frame of reference. The chapters vary wildly in length; the shortest is twelve pages (including endnotes), the longest is forty-eight pages long (including endnotes). If there was a rationale for this, it should have been explained in the introduction.

I was left feeling frustrated by this collection, not only because I felt that the arguments put forward were often too complacent and either not aware of--or simply not engaging with--some of the most recent and exciting contributions to this field (such as The Monstrous Middle Ages, ed. Bettina Bildhauer and Robert Mills [1993], Jeffrey Jerome Cohen's "Monster Culture (Seven Theses)", in Monster Theory, ed. J. J. Cohen [1996], Text and Territory: Geographical Imagination in the European Middle Ages, ed. Sylvia Tomasch and Sealy Gilles [1998], or, perhaps particularly given the title Monsters, Marvels, and Miracles: Studies in the Medieval and Early Modern Imaginations, ed. Timothy S. Jones et al [2002]), but also because the overwhelming number of technical errors and inconsistencies suggest a certain cavalier disregard for the book's audience.
Miracle Explosion began as a short-lived comic-strip I created years ago. With the advent of Flash, I have decided to make it into an epic animated series. This is episode #01: Anointment. If you enjoy this, be sure to visit my site where you can see more of my work, as well as the original MX strips. By the way, I made the music using Sonic Foundry's Acid Program. It didn't come from Napster. anyone wishing to be added to the fourchinnigan.com mailing list-send a message to chinny@fourchinnigan.com. Log in / sign up to vote & review!