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Review of Gendering Disgust in Medieval Religious Polemic

William I. Miller

University of Michigan Law School, wimiller@umich.edu

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Alexandra Cuffel, *Gendering Disgust in Medieval Religious Polemic*. Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007. Pp. xviii, 430. 10 b/w illustrations.

Ms. Cuffel works with sources in Hebrew, Greek, Arabic, Latin, and more than a few of the various medieval vernaculars, which has to be somewhat intimidating to a reviewer whose connection with the medieval is Old Icelandic and Old English and whose connection with Hebrew was via the whip of Bar Mitzvah and who learned all the words needed to vaccinate anally thousands of chickens in the *lul*, the chickenhouse, on a kibbutz way back in 1964. I thus have to take the author at her word except, I suppose, when it comes to knowledge of the revulsion occasioned by fecundity and rot, of the horror of skin gone bad, of the misbehavior of the orifices of human bodies, their discharges—semen, menstrual blood, mucus, saliva, vomit, excrement, afterbirth, and such; and I can also trust to my own knowledge of other unfortunate members of God's creation—pigs, snakes, toads, rats, maggots, even, alas, dogs—who are enlisted as disgusting avatars of humans who have let the side down.

It is hardly surprising that polemical invective should have recourse to the idiom of disgust. Try to let someone know how offensive you think they are without employing images of disgust. Our earliest insults are of the order of “you stink” or “you make me sick.” And one

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suspects the link of the idiom of disgust to certain kinds of deep disapproval is a cross-cultural and transtemporal universal. One particular point about disgust that Cuffel ignores is that it often operates as part of complexly motivated and ambivalent desires that make the disgusting, the prohibited, attractive or at least interesting. Disgust is not wholly aversive. Whole disciplines arise, like anthropology, medieval studies, trauma studies, sex and gender studies, just so the disgusting—"You mean they did (ate) that?"—can be indulged without shame and with no small delight.

That Christians, and to a lesser extent Muslims (back then at least), thought Jews revolting is nothing new; but that Jews thought Christians revolting, and indulged in delightfully blasphemous polemics registering their revulsion, is a refreshing change of pace. Of course they did, but woe to them if the Christians learned Hebrew. Jewish cover was blown by the twelfth century. Jews, as indeed the pagans before them, and Muslims coterminously with them, were horrified by the idea of the Incarnation. God in a stinking womb, lodged so near urine and feces, born in a flush of afterbirth, nourished, as the belief would have it, with menstrual blood in the womb and suckled with milk, itself a transformation wrought on menstrual blood according to standard medical theory?

It was not just that God came from woman, but that he became man, which meant God/Jesus could not escape urination, defecation, or farting. What kind of respectable God, wondered pagan, Jew, and Muslim, would ever do that? One Jewish polemical tract—*Toledot Yesu*—declared Jesus a bastard born of a menstruating Mary. No wonder Jesus challenged the wisdom of his respected elders. That is just what one would expect from a *ben niddah*, a son of menstruation.

Cuffel starts her story with pagan-Christian polemics, in which Christians, because of their own ambivalence about the flesh, anxiously felt the force of attacks by pagan platonists for whom divinity was to be aggressively distinguished from corporality. She takes her account well into the thirteenth century, and though she is careful to document changes in the tone and substance of the polemics, the story remains much the same. Menstrual blood and excrement figure prominently, though the polemic shifts—finding its grounding now in scientific and medical discourse, now in theology, now in just plain name-calling.

But by the eleventh to thirteenth centuries, real Jews were losing their lives because of the more charged meanings that blood had come to take. Blood was now bursting beyond the bounds of female menstruation to encompass a supposed Jewish male menstruation, monthly anal

bleeding. Both hemorrhoids and menstruation were caused in the latest medical theory by “corrupt blood,” with “corrupt” bearing both moral and medicinal meanings.

Enter the Real Presence. If Jews were revolted by what they imputed to Christians as lack of concern with purity violations, be these with menstruation, ejaculation, skin diseases, or Levitical food prohibitions, Christians repaid the favor by seeing Jews as blood eaters, child murderers, and host desecrators. Trite as it is to observe, it is nonetheless very hard not to see Jews paying the price for Christian anxiety about the incredibility of transubstantiation and, surely, revulsion at the thought of eating Christ and drinking his blood. So Jews excused from drinking Jesus’ blood by their stubborn refusal to convert, were, apparently, seen to drink it anyway, by killing Christian children and using their blood as curative alimentation, for that blood had been fed on Jesus’ blood: the food chain in a new light.

Eucharistic devotion generated tales of Jews re-killing Jesus by stabbing the communion host, but also tales of Christians being even more blasphemous. Caroline Bynum in her transformational work has, among many other things, focused our attention on the alimentary in devotion, especially female devotion; tales of women seeking to live on the Eucharist alone were not uncommon, but what of the story of a twelfth-century man who decided to do the same in order to prove that he could transmogrify God into shit? He was struck dead fifteen days into his diet. It was claimed that whatever wastes he had discharged in the meantime were formed from his own body consumed from within by its own vileness, not from Christ’s (114).

A chapter on impure, sickly bodies shows that, already by the eleventh century, Jews had come to internalize a Christian critique that saw them as ugly and weak, offering early signs that Diasporan Jewish self-hatred predated Jewish emancipation by some seven hundred years. Even the great Rashi accepted Jewish ugliness, referencing the suffering servant of Isaiah 53:3, where he tried to turn physical deformity to Jewish moral advantage.

A final chapter on animal epithets has some surprises, but mostly it is remarkable how durable these kinds of insults are. Jews were thus so many serpents, hyenas, worms, pigs, and ravens. But that they were also owls, hares, stags, and snails might raise an eyebrow—not, however, once it is known that hares and snails were emblems of cowardice, the stag of victimhood, and owls of filth. To this day we still use the pig in standard invective, and the dog—though many of us love them more than we do all but a few humans—still provide common terms of opprobrium.

Cuffel treats us to a wide range of sources, devoting more time to Jewish/Christian hostility than to Muslim/Christian, the former getting down and dirtier as invective at least, because, well, Muslims could fight and thus be engaged in a manly fashion and they, except in Spain and the East, were not present. Jews, however, were very much present and protected, unfortunately, by kings and churchmen. Nor had Jews taken over the Holy Sepulcher. It was all very frustrating for Christians. So they fantasized Jewish violence or presumed it from the impotent hostile wishes Jews gave voice to in their prayers. Then too, as Cuffel notes, because Muslims had more relaxed purity rules than Jews, Muslims were less motivated by disgust for Christians than Jews were. Muslims were mostly just incredulous that anyone could worship a god who felt it necessary to become a man. It seems it was more likely in those days that a Muslim rather than a Jew would complain of a Frank having a “goyische kopf.”

Cuffel’s footnotes are voluminous, as is her bibliography, both of primary and secondary materials; she is generous in her citations. She knows a lot and presents it well. The notes contain much excellent material and make for good reading themselves, though because they are unfortunately printed as endnotes, they must be enjoyed after the chapter. The book consistently engaged my interest because the primary material from the Jewish and Muslim sides was mostly new to me, and it was riveting.

I have only a couple of minor complaints. One is the cant of “gendering” in the title, since there is very little theory-cant in the book. The other is that though gender is clearly doing considerable work in these polemics, the gendering might just as well be seen as a secondary effect of a more generalized disgust with procreation and death, primarily focused, at least by the eleventh century, on blood—and rather ungendered blood at that. The book is thus more about blood and excrement than about masculine and feminine.

One last note: One item Cuffel mentions from the *Chronicle of Solomon bar Simson* left me sickened; I will never be able to say the grace after meal again—not that I say it very often—without it haunting me. Says the source—though it may not be entirely trustworthy, but that hardly matters, the story being no less horrifying for that—Jews who committed suicide or killed each other to avoid falling into the hands of Crusaders took care to kill each other obeying the laws of *Kashrut*. And those still standing were instructed to say the grace after meals (220). No doubt because it is outside the remit of disgust among people of different creeds, but hardly outside the remit of polemic, Ms. Cuffel does not

note, nor does the pious account it is taken from, that the Jews in the story, like more than a few of the psalmists, are perhaps best seen as hurling polemical invective at God, not at their Christian murderers, in order to wake him up, or call him to his duty if he is awake. He has sold them for slaughter like lambs, while they, still faithful, follow his laws to make themselves food that meets all the requirements of the purity rules. In the words of Psalm 44: "Thou hast given us like sheep appointed for meat . . . yet have we not forgotten thee, neither have we dealt falsely in thy covenant." In Christian eyes, however, the Jews' self-likening to slaughtered sheep missed the mark; they were to be butchered as pigs.

W. I. Miller
University of Michigan