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A Response to David Aers

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David Aers' paper cogently reminds us that the devotional is political: ". . . it cannot be emphasized too strongly that issues of hermeneutics, devotion and the imposition of disciplinary power were inextricably bound together in late medieval Christianity." This disciplinary power, he also admonishes us, intertwines itself with the production and consumption of abjection.

Can medievalists disentangle writing a history of abjection from contemporary contests over abjection? Anxieties expressed in medieval studies and current political debate suggest not. Over the 1980s, medievalists have asked themselves not only if their discipline is abject, or if they are abject for being medievalists, but they have also asked who and what is abject in the medieval period.1 The return of the abject Body of Christ to medieval studies, indeed, to this conference, emblematizes this intense concern with the construction of the abject then and now. Medievalists asked these questions in the very moment that the religious right strengthened its cultural agenda in the United States, a move which foregrounded its complicity with the politics of abjection. In concerned response, critical theorists have called for for "a specific reworking of abjection into political agency."2 To rest content with simply demonizing the religious-right, as is often the case, both avoids the devotional as political and tacitly agrees to the ongoing production of abjection rather than its reworking in public culture today.3

I am interested in asking of Aers' paper how the study of abjection enables and disables the production of abjection in medieval studies. My comments seek to trouble his interpretation of the Lollard project. I question if their reconfiguration of the abject body of Christ might not work as a reverse discourse of its day. In her discussions of abjection, Judith Butler has defined reverse discourse as one which, in its defiance, reinstalls the version it seeks to overcome.4 If medievalists embrace Lollardy too eagerly as the sign of active resistance to the control of the medieval church over the consumption of abjection, do we too then fall into a reverse discourse?

Two images which haunted me as I read "Figuring Forth" helped to bring on these troubling questions. I will conjure them here, since they offer a glimpse of methodological possibilities for criss-crossing histories of the production and consumption of abjection, that might enable medievalist to avoid falling in with reverse discourses (then and now).

You have probably already seen the first image which I am about to describe, or one like the it. I came across it among the photographs illustrating John Phillips' book on *The Reformation of Images: Destruction of Art in England, 1535-1660* (Berkeley, 1973). Please imagine this black and white photograph with me. It shows the base of a medieval rood screen at St. Mary's Priory, Binham, Norfolk. The medieval rood screen was cut down, whitewashed and painted

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over with the text of Tyndale's translation of the New Testament in the aftermath of the Order of Council of February 1548 which endorsed that images be "clean taken away and pulled down."5 The medieval rood-figures can be seen like shadows flickering through the graffiti of gospel text.

The flicker of abjection and its engendering is as powerfully described in a second image that comes from Janet Winterson's "historical" novel entitled *Sexing the Cherry*:

I went to a church not far from the gardens. A country church famed for its altar window where our Lord stood feeding the five thousand. Black Tom Fairfax, with nothing better to do, had set up his cannon outside the window and given the order to fire. There was no window when I got there and the men had ridden away . . . . There was a group of women gathered round the remains of the glass which colored the floor brighter than any carpet of flower in parterre. They were the women who had cleaned the window, polishing the slippery fish our Lord had blessed in his outstretched hands, scraping away the candle smoke from the feet of the Apostles. They loved the window. Without speaking, and in common purpose, the women began to gather the pieces of the window in their baskets.6

These haunting palimpsests of iconophobia and iconophilia bear witness to the complications of the abjection of abjection its violence. I am using both a historical and fictional example to sharpen a difference between myself and Aers over what constitutes the so-called "real" in the discourse of medieval studies. I am trying to challenge his notion that either example could contain within itself some kind of meta-exclusionary power over what is going to count as context, specificity, the "real."7 The instabilities that these palimpsests imply also suggest to me that power to control the consumption of abjection and the spaces of that consumption in late medieval Europe were not identical with the power and spaces that produced abjection. Indeed, I would argue that it is perhaps this non-identity of consumption and production of abjection which made abjection and its control so contested.

In the flicker, then, of these palimpsests let me now turn to some of the specific arguments of Aers' paper. In a Foucauldian move Aers repositions the study of the late medieval Body of Christ by arguing that this body was produced as the *effect* of a powerful, clerical discourse aimed at regulating what counts for orthodoxy. He then goes on to question the well-known argument made by Caroline Bynum that medieval women were empowered by their identification with this abject, feminized late medieval Christ. Aers notes that their devotional practices, their *imitatio christi*, reinforced rather than challenged the power of the clerics. In fact, their identification helped to produce them as the object of clerical control. Through this discursive control, clerics were able to engender the abject as feminine.

At this juncture Aers then splices his critique of Bynum with contemporary

theological commentary of the Dominican priest, Edward Schillebeeckx, who regards the late medieval theology of suffering as a reactionary one, one that reinforced social abuses. The mystical and positive significance that suffering took on in the late medieval church "lacked (according to Schillebeeckx) critical power" (p. 8). The work of Schillebeeckx, a thoughtful, dissident Catholic theologian, circulates in translation in North America at a moment in which ruling Catholic clergy find themselves deeply divided over their policies to regulate sexual practices, especially homosexuality, and also at a moment in which the clergy's public track record for dealing compassionately with what is perceived as a radically abjecting disease, AIDS, is much questioned. Schillebeeckx's positioning of the abject in his theology calls for a strong, more historically situated reading before embracing it, as Aers has, as a way of thinking about medieval abjection.

Medieval clerics, Aers argues, controlled the discursive production of bodies. Female devotees were their dupes, the effective production of clerical discourse. According to Aers these clerics exercised an *almost* absolute hegemony (p. 9), except for an English group of doctrinal dissidents, the Lollards. Lollards, among whom may be counted heterodox clerics (who mark fractures in a monolith of late medieval orthodox clergy) refused this forced diet of consuming abjection.8 They spit abjection out, so to speak, and insisted, according to Aers, on an image of a public, masculine Christ: ". . . mobile, articulate, teaching, healing, he is a layman with a public and prophetic sense of practices" (p. 7). This Christ is a Christ with options and choices. In the words of Schillebeeckx cited by Aers: "Jesus did not seek his own death, and he did not even want his passion Gethsemane is a radical contradiction of that" (p. 8). In other words Christ did not choose abjection (for Aers' rhetoric of "choosing" Lollards see p. 11).9

The *lack of choice* is a sign of abjection for Aers. This manly, public, choosing Christ is contrasted by Aers several times to separatist, submissive, practices of late medieval female pieties women who did not choose. Twice Aers contrasts the "charming" dialogue (p. 9) of Margery Kempe before Archbishop Arundel with "fierce" (p. 10) encounters between Lollards and Arundel. The active resistance of the Lollards provides Aers with an important device for decoding orthodox figurations of Christ's body. The Lollard code, which slips at moments in the paper into an Aers' code about "choice," a code well-articulated in Thatcherite England in the 1980s, struck me, with its binary repetitions based on such oppositions as the following: choice vs. domination; manly and public Christ vs. crucified Christ.

Such oppositions raise the question of whether the Lollards were caught in a reverse discourse one that failed to sponsor the "radical challenge to the contemporary church" that Aers with his attentiveness to politics hoped to find. We need to question whether a Lollard rejection of the crucified Christ, their iconophobic practices, reconfigured the consumption of the abject in late medieval religious practice? Or, could it be that their iconophobia actually fed this voracious appetite? Is their iconophobia a kind of hunger artistry not so

different from some of the pious feminine practices made famous by Caroline Bynum's work?

The questions I have just posed seek to reposition the Lollards in a discursive field of a history of abjection, the temporalities and spatialities of which likely exceed the canonical, medieval chronologies and geographies.10 A brief glance forward to the sixteenth century teaches us that iconophobia came not only to disfigure images but also, importantly, to refigure the graphic and acoustical aspects of script, especially gospel script. The text of the Gospel became a kind of cultic graffiti, such that what counts for writing also becomes an act of disfiguration, an abjecting technique at the same time. The image of the white-washed rood screen written over with a Gospel text illustrates my point here.

In a brilliant study entitled *The Interpretation of Material Shapes in Puritanism: A Study of Rhetoric, Prejudice and Violence*, Ann Kibbey has shown how the relations of sound with meaning were reconfigured by reforms of late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries and how this acoustical rhetoric intersects with the iconoclastic notion of the "living image." In her words "Because iconoclasm concerned the significance of human beings as material shapes, because it sanctioned material harm, and because it thrived on the confusion between people and objects, the iconoclastic dimension of Puritanism strongly influenced the development of prejudice."11

It may seem like bad history to speak of the Lollards in this broad discursive framework of iconophobia, reformation and prejudice, but I think that wrenching Lollards out of their late medieval English niche might be productive for writing histories of abjection. It enables medievalists to raise pressing questions about the history of the abject. If the Lollards did not rework the late medieval abject and simply abjected the abject, then their discourse functioned as a reverse discourse. Medievalists need to think carefully about the implications of such a move in political interpretation.

I want to take up that challenge and push the question of Lollards even harder. In the move towards a theology of living images in late medieval and early modern Europe, the living mental image that would become most privileged is that of *marriage*. Lyndal Roper has outlined how the Reform iconography of marriage refigured gender relations and proved to have little empowering or enabling to offer women.12 Iconophobia produced its own iconophilia for marriage, and within this imaging system women fared little better than women under the hegemony of the late medieval clerics.

Nevertheless, even after six hundred years, the Lollards attract us. They seem to represent a moment of agency that satisfies our contemporary desires for history. But the medievalist's desire for agency can also be read in another way, especially if we ask ourselves what the conditions of possibilty for agency might be.13 One possible answer can be that their agency provides a welcome displacement to an abjecting medieval devotional politics. Their agency allows us to turn away from those engendered and abjected by the church. This turn can, however, cause us to miss important clues to the unfinished project of

reworking the abject in the medieval period as well as today.

I will conclude with some thoughts about these clues, but before I proceed I wish to assure you that I am not setting a romantic "victim" discourse over against a romantic "resistance" discourse. I am asking "us" (David Aers, myself and our audience) to think what reworking those oppositions might entail, historically and currently. I am trying to name the alterity of "resistance" and "victim" discourses as the interpretative problem at stake here.

Rather than turn away from the medieval consumption of abjection to the too easy statement that it was empowering to women, or to an alternative and equally facile claim, that active resistance lay elsewhere (that is to find a hero to relieve the difficulties of this abject landscape), perhaps we need to come even closer to abjection, to travel to the zone of the abject where the "unlivable," the bodies that don't matter, reside. Among medieval bodies that did not matter were those of Jews, sodomites, heretics, and lepers at the exterior of *Christianitas*. Here I think we need to join the study of the devotional as political with the study of medieval anti-Semitism and medieval queer studies. Medieval efforts either to mime or to abject the abject could not rework abjection. The reworking has to be done at the site of

production (then and now) with a historical approach to the political that puts "the parameters of the political itself into question" by making "distinctions between the constitution of a political field that produces and naturalizes the constitutive outside and a political field that renders contingent the specific parameters of that constitutive outside."14

Let me return once again to the image of the rood screen which I conjured. The shadowy rood-figures, the so-called dead image for Reformers, flicker through the gospel text, the so-called live image. This palimpsest needs to be read side by side with the bodies that both visual systems erased and relegated to the exterior to the site of production of the abject. Such palimpsests travelled beyond the European shores of the Atlantic to America, to places and to institutions in which members of this audience continue to produce knowledge today. As Kibbey powerfully shows, the iconophobia and scriptural iconophila of English Reform travelled to the New World and there helped to produce the conditions of agency that resulted in Puritan decisions to slaughter the Pequot Indians, banish Anne Hutchinson, and perhaps, most ironically, to found Harvard University, all this in 1637, just a mere two hundred and twenty years after Archbishop Arundel, in response to the Lollards, drew up Constitutions for inhibiting popular heresy.15

Notes

1. Lee Patterson raises such concerns in his essay "On the Margin: Postmodernism, Ironic History, and Medieval Studies," *Speculum* 65 (1990), 87; see also Anne Middleton, "Medieval Studies," in *Redrawing the Boundaries*, ed. Stephen Greenblatt and Giles Gunn (New York, 1992), pp. 12-140.

2. Judith Butler, *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"* (New York, 1993), p. 21.

3. Susan Harding, "Representing Fundamentalism: The Problem of the

Repugnant Cultural Other," *Social Research* 58 (1991), pp. 373-93.

4. Butler, *Bodies that Matter*, p. 21. My comments are indebted to this work; also Katie King, "Local and Global: AIDS Activism and Feminist Theory," *Camera Obscura* 28 (1992), pp. 78-99.

5. Figure 24b in John Phillips, *The Reformation of Images: Destruction of Art in England, 1535-1660* (Berkeley, 1973), p. 94.

6 Janet Winterson, *Sexing the Cherry* (London, 1991), pp. 65-66.

7. As Peggy Phalen has remarked in *The Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* (New York, 1993): "[T]he very proliferation of discourse can only disable the possibility of the Real-real" (p. 3). On history and the problem of the "real," see Michel de Certeau, *The Writing of History*, trans., Tom Conley (New York, 1988).

8. See Margaret Aston, "Lollards and Images," *Lollards and Reformers: Images and Literacy in Late Medieval Religion* (London, 1984), pp. 135-92.

9. For a critical analysis of the language of "choice" as part of an English history of technologies of the visible and the implications of these technologies in the production of "History" and "Nature" in transnational capitalism see Marilyn Strathern, *After Nature: English Kinship in the Late Twentieth Century* (New York, 1992).

10. Here I want to join such work as Aston's "Lollardy and the Reformation: Survival or Revival," in her *Lollards and Reformers*, pp. 219-72 with questions about temporality and emergent histories raised by Homi Bhabha in his essays in *The Location of Culture* (New York, 1994).

11. Ann Kibbey, *The Interpretation of Material Shapes in Puritanism: A Study of Rhetoric, Prejudice and Violence* (New York, 1986), p.44.

12. Lyndal Roper, *The Holy Household: Women and Morals in Reformation Augsburg* (Oxford, 1989).

13. For an important discussion of agency see Judith Butler, "Contingent Foundations: Feminism and the Question of "Postmodernism,"" in *Feminists Theorize the Political*, eds., Judith Butler and Joan W. Scott (New York, 1992), pp. 3-21.

14. Butler, "Contingent Foundations," p. 20.

15. At the IMA session at which my paper was delivered, I offended several members of the audience by joining these three decisions taken in 1637. I was heard as taking gratuitous "pot-shots" at Harvard. I disagree with this reading and stand by this intervention. I intended it not as an aggrandizing or demonizing rhetorical "flourish," but as a gesture toward marking the *violence* of "Christian origins" of the theological universities of the United States (Harvard and Princeton), the origins of which scholars such as George Marsden invoke and to which Marsden calls for a return; see his *Soul of the American University* (New York, 1994). For alternative readings see Susan Howe, *The Birth-mark: Unsettling the Wilderness in American Literary History* (Hanover, N.H., 1993), especially "Incloser," pp. 43-86.