

Saint George and the Dragon: Saintly and Othered Bodies

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During the late-medieval and early-modern period, increasing travel, trade, and contact with peoples of different cultures, religions, and ethnicities within Western European territories challenged Christian understandings of the human body. This paper investigates whether such contemplations and fears, as established in the legend of Saint George and the Dragon, were a reflection of such changing conceptions about bodies. I consider how the legend reinforced the superiority of Caucasian, Christian, masculine ideals and argue that representations of the dragon reflected expanding cultural notions which marginalized anyone outside of those norms as Other.

Within Europe, the Christian church was the ultimate authority for determining and controlling who was considered 'normal.' Religious, physical, and cultural judgments became dangerous for those with non-normative bodies. Feminization through the punishment of the beast is a natural extension of systems which served to control active female sexuality as a threat to purity and holiness. Ethnic differences were also used to establish political and religious control based on stereotyped physical characteristics and skin colour. I argue that the dragon symbolized those human bodies deemed unqualified for belonging to 'humankind' and, therefore, ineligible for religious conversion and salvation.

Thus as they spake together the dragon appeared and came running to them, and S. George was upon his horse, and drew out his sword and garnished him with the sign of the cross, and rode hardily against the dragon which came towards him, and smote him with his spear and hurt him sore and threw him to the ground.

—Jacobus de Voragine, *The Golden Legend*

Scholarship in recent decades has shown that medieval bodies were highly charged with meaning.¹ As a time of increasing travel, trade, and contact with peoples of different cultures, religions, and ethnicities during the later Middle Ages, the Western European

¹ Monica H. Green, "Introduction," in *A Cultural History of the Human Body in the Medieval Age*, ed. Linda Kalof (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2014), 1-2. See Caroline Walker Bynum, "Why All the Fuss about the Body? A Medievalist's Perspective," *Critical Inquiry* 22 (Autumn 1995): 1-33; reprinted in *After the Cultural Turn*, ed. Victoria Bonnell and Lynn Hunter (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999).

understanding of the human body was challenged.² Late medieval contemplations and fears about bodies and the addition of Saint George's battle with a dragon to his hagiography (his sacred biography) was a reflection of changing ways of thinking about the variations possible among human bodies and where the limits of 'humanness' were drawn. Both text and images were used to reinforce the superiority of suitably human bodies—those which conformed to Caucasian, Christian, masculine ideals—in turn, marginalizing anyone outside of those norms as Other.³ This article begins by offering a brief history of Saint George and his heroic battle and common images of the defeat of the dragon whose monstrous presence was employed to symbolically caution Christians against the evils of sin. The literary development of the legend and its visual representations in the Middle Ages reflected expanding cultural notions of the monstrous Other and its use to signify the 'grotesque,' the racialized, the feminized, and the pagan⁴—in other words, all those who fell outside the norms of medieval European Christianity.

Early History of Saint George

Saint George was born in Cappadocia—"the crossroads of Byzantine, Arab, and Transcaucasian worlds"—around the year 270 CE.⁵ His popularity as a soldier saint grew throughout the Crusades (1095-1291 CE), during which he was first associated with dragon

² Monica H. Green, "The Diversity of Human Kind," in *A Cultural History of the Human Body in the Medieval Age*, ed. Linda Kalof (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2014), 163-4.

³ *Ibid.*, 173-4.

⁴ For the purposes of this paper the term 'pagan' refers to all those who held religious beliefs other than Christianity.

⁵ Elizabeth Oke Gordon, *Saint George, Champion of Christendom and Patron Saint of England* (London: S. Sonnenschein and Company, 1907), 3, 23; Sara Kuehn, *The Dragon in Medieval East Christian and Islamic Art*, vol. 86 (Boston: Brill, 2011), 106; Peter Murray, Linda Murray, and Tom Devonshire Jones, editors, "George, Saint," *the Oxford Dictionary of Christian Art and Architecture*, 2013. Oxford Reference (accessed 11 November 2016). He was martyred at Lydda (present day Diospoli, Palestine) by Emperor Diocletian on April 23, 304. Often associated with other warrior saints, Demetrios and Theodore, George's cult was prevalent in Byzantium, Syria, Egypt, Armenia, and Ethiopia during the 6th century. During the 14th century, George became the patron saint of England, Genoa, Barcelona, Portugal, Venice, the Order of the Garter, the Spanish Order of Calatrava, and soldiers and armourers.

slaying in an 11th century Georgian manuscript.⁶ The legendary battle with the dragon was formally added to Saint George's history in Jacobus de Voragine's *The Golden Legend* (ca. 1260 CE).⁷ As the centuries unfolded, Saint George's battle came to represent a period when European Christians increasingly encountered people with unfamiliar faiths and bodies within their own territories. This led to the construction of fear-based notions about such Others and the development of tales which feature the annihilation of non-Christians, feminized adversaries, and racialized groups as forms of reassurance.⁸

The Legend of *Saint George and the Dragon*

The legend begins with a dragon terrorizing the ancient city of Selena in Libya. To keep the creature appeased, the local people fed it two sheep every day. When the sheep ran out, human victims were then offered, drawn by lottery. However, when the king's daughter was chosen he tried to offer the people his wealth in exchange. The citizens, having already given children of their own, refused his offer and the virgin maiden was sent to the marsh of the dragon's lair. While she awaited her fate, Saint George happened by, and, determining the situation, made the sign of the cross, stabbed the approaching dragon with his lance, and used the maiden's girdle to tame the beast. The princess was then able to quietly lead it into the city, although this action terrified the citizens and the king. There, Saint George promised to kill the beast if the people converted from their pagan beliefs to Christianity and agreed to be baptised. Once this was done, Saint George cut off the dragon's head and continued on with his travels.

Representations of the Legend

Paintings and other visual depictions of the legend remained fairly standardized over the centuries. As can be seen in artworks such as Paolo Uccello's *Saint George and the Dragon* (ca. 1470) (Fig. 1), Saint George typically wears the armour of a Roman soldier or a

⁶ Kuehn, *The Dragon in Medieval East Christian and Islamic Art*, 109-10; Oya Pancaroğlu, "The Itinerant Dragon-Slayer: Forging Paths of Image and Identity in Medieval Anatolia," *Gesta* 43 (2004): 153.

⁷ Murray, Murray, and Jones, "George, Saint," George Ferguson, *Signs and Symbols of Christian Art* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1954), 121-2.

⁸ Stuart Hall, "Introduction," in *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*, eds. Stuart Hall and Open University (Thousand Oaks, CA, London: Sage and Open University, 1997) 9-11.

medieval knight, which may or may not include his sign, a red cross on a white background, as a sign of chivalry and Christianity's protection against evil. He rides a horse, which is typically but not always white (as a symbol of purity), and tramples the dragon beneath its front hooves as an allusion to the domination of the church.⁹ Though he penetrates the dragon with his lance—symbolizing the weapon used to pierce the side of Jesus during the Passion—Saint George also carries the sword of the warrior.¹⁰ The saint is also typically shown with a halo, or, as in the case of Tintoretto's *Saint George and the Dragon* (ca. 1555) (Fig. 2), the halo is replaced with swirling masses of clouds centered around an amorphous human figure in the sky, which alludes to God's offer of his divine assistance, and endorsement of the dragon's slaughter. There are frequently visible remains of previous victims scattered about as a further indication of the dragon's reign of terror. Depictions of a far-off city or civilians may also be included, sometimes in "eastern dress and turbans" as can be seen in Vittore Carpaccio's *Triumph of St George* (1502-1507) (Fig. 3).¹¹

Many, but not all, representations of the legend include a depiction of the rescued princess, often avoiding the fray while remaining in the background praying for salvation. In depictions where the dragon has already been lanced, the beast is shown subdued by the maiden's girdle. During the medieval period, the female figure was often used to personify a city or town.¹² The girdle was a unisex item worn over the outer layers of clothing and "served as a purse, protection, and ornament."¹³ For women, the girdle was additionally a sign of their chastity and honour.¹⁴ Thus, the princess's body came to symbolize the pagan city about to be converted as well as the virtues of female virginity. By saving the life of the maiden, Saint George is seen as winning the faith of the citizens of the city while also aligning himself with the purity expected of both women and saints of the medieval period.

⁹ Ferguson, *Signs and Symbols of Christian Art*, 169-70; James Hall, *Dictionary of Subjects and Symbols in Art*, Revised Edition (Bury St Edmunds, UK: St Edmundsbury Press, 1979), 136-7.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 177 and 182.

¹¹ Hall, *Dictionary of Subjects and Symbols*, 136-7.

¹² *Ibid.*, 306.

¹³ Ferguson, *Signs and Symbols of Christian Art*, 174. "Christ used [the girdle] to symbolize preparation for any service that God might require of his Children."

¹⁴ Ferguson, *Signs and Symbols of Christian Art*, 175.

Monstrous Bodies as the Other

Visual representations of the dragon offer insight into how notions of Othered bodies were feared, stigmatized, and negatively depicted as propaganda to medieval audiences. Monstrous adversaries were conceived to focus and embody those collective fears. Prior to the 11th century, Saint George's foe was a man, frequently bound and prostrated and often understood to be his persecutor Emperor Diocletian.¹⁵ However, spiritual crises within the church, class struggles, conflicts with the Muslim world, rising anti-Semitism, the inquisition, and "frenzied obsession with the antichrist" led to paranoia and anxiety within medieval Christendom.¹⁶ The serpent, which has represented the devil since the *Book of Genesis*, and its variant, the dragon, became a far more sinister symbol and focal point for addressing such tensions and began replacing representations of human foes. Dragons were a motif familiar to medieval audiences from 1st century BCE Celtic cultures, as well as ancient Asian beliefs, where such creatures were commonly a benevolent deity or good omen.¹⁷ Depicted with any combination of a number of horns, claws, heads, tails, and wings, dragons have proven to be adaptable to numerous cultures and characteristics over the centuries. They became a powerfully symbolic proxy for the human bodies that incited collective Christian fears of spiritual and physical harm.¹⁸

As pressures in medieval European Christendom mounted, increasing questions about 'human nature' and unfamiliar human bodies were raised—particularly whether such monstrous and grotesque bodies should be considered human at all.¹⁹ The term 'monster' originates from the words *monere* ("warn") and *monstrare* ("show").²⁰ Between the 12th and 15th centuries distinctions between humans and animals also grew. Visual representations of the devil and

¹⁵ Kuehn, *The Dragon in Medieval East Christian and Islamic Art*, 108.

¹⁶ Ariane Delacampagne and Christian Delacampagne, *Here Be Dragons: A Fantastical Bestiary* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005), 162-3.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 133-4.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 126 and 133.

¹⁹ Green, "The Diversity of Human Kind," 163, 169. As Green states on page 163, "All these places were filled with human bodies. But were they even fully "human," or did they partake only in some partial way the character of humanness?... At what point did [a body] stop being human and become something monstrous or even bestial?"

²⁰ *Ibid.*

all non-human creatures, including animals other than the lamb and unicorn, came to be seen as morally inferior to humans and linked with bestial sins of lust and temptation.²¹ While some theologians argued that all creatures created by God were divine, the monstrous remained broadly stigmatized as abnormal and, therefore, immoral and deserving of eradication.²² The bodies of Christian soldier saints and their adversaries were increasingly used as a system of visual and textual representations for juxtaposing Christian supremacy over paganism and evil.²³ By representing the legend's invader as a non-human, monstrous Other, Saint George's valour was even more heroic by comparison. His light-skinned, human/saint's body, cast in the form of God, was elevated in contrast to the dark, animalistic body of the dragon.

Ethnic Differences

In the 13th century, Chinese refugees fleeing Genghis Khan intermingled with the Muslim world and expanded upon already long-established trade routes.²⁴ Likewise, exchanges between Christians and Muslim merchants and traders had occurred for centuries in places such as Spain, Damascus, and Constantinople.²⁵ However, increasing encounters with unfamiliar realms of people by Western Europeans within their own territories put additional strain on Christian belief systems. The first instance of "state experiments in tagging and herding people, and ruling on their bodies with the violence of law" began in 1215 with Canon 68 of the Fourth Lateran Council, in which the church demanded that all Jews and Muslims be visually distinguishable from Christians.²⁶ Ethnic differences were further qualified to establish distinct races for the maintenance of political and religious control. Medieval bodies were demarcated by a hierarchy of physical traits that were thought to distinguish one's morality or capabilities and therefore their legal rights and treatment by secular and religious authorities.

²¹ Ibid., 122.

²² Delacampagne and Delacampagne, *Here Be Dragons*, 49.

²³ Pancaroğlu, "The Itinerant Dragon-Slayer," 152.

²⁴ Ibid., 151.

²⁵ Delacampagne and Delacampagne, *Here Be Dragons*, 151-2; Green, "The Diversity of Human Kind," 163-4.

²⁶ Geraldine Heng, "The Invention of Race in the European Middle Ages I: Race Studies, Modernity, and the Middle," *Literature Compass* 8 (2011): 315, 318. England was the first country to evoke a law requiring Jews to wear badges in 1218 and the first to expel all non-converted Jews in 1290.

Some deviations were stereotyped physical characteristics, such as the caricatured ‘Jewish-shaped nose,’ whereas other categories were based upon a continuum of skin colour in which white was seen as “a visual marker of inner courage” while black was “the colour of devils and demons.”²⁷ In medieval Christian representations the dragon is demarcated as threatening by its dark, earth-toned skin in contrast to the pure whiteness of Saint George and the princess. By depicting the Other as a dark-toned monster, artists and viewers were able to easily distinguish such bodies from Christians—a dragon’s body did not require the additional adornment of clothing or badges to visually signify its threatening presence.²⁸

Feminization and Deviant Female Desires

Another form of establishing and maintaining power in the medieval period was through the use of gender roles. As early as Aristotle (384-322 BCE), the difference between ‘form’ as masculinity and intellect and ‘matter’ as femininity and physicality meant that women were also considered “the first sign of monstrosity.”²⁹ Subsequently, a Christian binary system of male and female was established, grounded in man (Adam) being first and therefore the norm and woman as non-male and abnormal. During the medieval period, having a ‘male body’ meant that one would naturally engage in active, masculine behaviour in all areas of life, including the penetrating of another during sexual intercourse, while those with female bodies would naturally be passive and seek to be penetrated as part of their “biological nature.”³⁰ In her research on the legend, Samantha Riches has discovered over fifty representations in which the dragon is clearly depicted with female anatomy.³¹ For example, the

²⁷ Green, “The Diversity of Human Kind,” 178; Heng, “The Invention of Race in the European Middle Ages,” 315, 318, 324-5.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 173-4, 178.

²⁹ Delacampagne and Delacampagne, *Here Be Dragons*, 48.

³⁰ Ruth Mazo Karras and Jacqueline Murray, “The Sexual Body,” in *A Cultural History of the Human Body in the Medieval Age*, ed. Linda Kalof (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2014), 60-1. Though it was considered to be in a woman’s nature to be passive, it was also believed that “women were more lustful than men and were always ready to engage in sex.” Additionally, within homosexual relationships, only the participant being acted upon—penetrated—was considered to be feminized.

³¹ Andrew Lawless, “Gendered Monsters—Art and Politics in the Representation of St. George and the Dragon: An Interview with Dr.

illuminated miniature *St. George, with Red Cross Emblem and Dragon* (ca. 1440-1450) (Fig. 4) shows a dragon lying prostrate on the ground exposing an obvious genital orifice. Though breasts are less frequent, they can be found works such as Albrecht Altdorfer's *Saint George Killing the Dragon* (1511) (Fig. 5) in which the dragon displays four breasts.³² If notions of passive yet lustful female sexuality and the monstrous female body were common during this period, representations of a feminized monster seems a reasonable outcome.³³ Within all accounts of the tale, the beast is penetrated by the saint's pseudo-phallic lance in an 'arguably coded' act of male aggression upon a submissive but wicked creature.³⁴ Feminization through the punishment of the beast seems a natural extension of visual programs which served to control active female sexuality as a threat to purity and holiness. Immoral female desire is symbolized by the denigrated dragon and female purity through the girdle and noted virginity of the rescued princess, both of whom are constructed in relation to the chaste and noble Saint George.

Christian Conversion and Salvation

Lastly, the legend questions the apparent supremacy of the Christian faith and the limitations of religious conversion by those people with Other bodies. The Christian church was the ultimate authority for determining and controlling who fell outside the boundaries of its religious, physical, and cultural norms. The church's judgements on what was considered common and 'normal' became dangerous for those who did not live within normative bodies.³⁵ Two categories were formed to differentiate such unfamiliar bodies. First, 'human monsters' were those who differed only slightly from normal humans and were, therefore, considered capable of rational behaviour

Samantha Riches," *Three Monkeys Online*, 2016.

³² Ibid.

³³ Samantha Riches and Bettina Bildhauer, "Cultural Representations of the Body," in *A Cultural History of the Human Body in the Medieval Age*, ed. Linda Kalof (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2014), 193, 197, 199.

³⁴ Riches and Bildhauer, "Cultural Representations of the Body," 199; Pancaroğlu, "The Itinerant Dragon-Slayer," 152. The destruction of the monstrous female body by holy riders can be traced back to 6th century Byzantine amulets on which iconography depicted a "prostrate female demon with long hair" being penetrated with a spear.

³⁵ Delacampagne and Delacampagne, *Here Be Dragons*, 48, 55; Green, "The Diversity of Human Kind," 173-4.

and salvation.³⁶ Within the legend, this included the king and citizens of Selena.³⁷ The second group, animal-like monsters, were seen as beyond redemption.³⁸ The dragon's body acted as a proxy for those people deemed by the church as unqualified for belonging to 'humankind' and ineligible for conversion or salvation.³⁹ Like the dragon, frequently the submission and civilization of some human Others was not enough, and annihilation became their fate.

Conclusion

...and the people fled by mountains and valleys, and said: Alas! alas! we shall all be dead. Then S. George said to them: ne doubt ye no thing, without more, believe ye in God, Jesu Christ, and do ye to be baptized and I shall slay the dragon. Then the king was baptized and all his people, and S. George slew the dragon and smote off his head...

—Jacobus de Voragine, *The Golden Legend*

The legend of *Saint George and the Dragon* is just one possible site for critically examining the many ways in which medieval bodies were thought to express meaning. Increased contact with unfamiliar types of bodies during this time led to anxieties and fears about what defined the human body and to new ways of evaluating, judging, and labeling those who fell outside of conventional, normative expectations.⁴⁰ As new encounters and tensions grew, so too did the hagiography of Saint George, resulting in the addition of his dragon-slaying battle. The legend was created to provide a symbolic narrative for medieval fears and anxieties about the spiritual and physical dangers of Others' bodies and the implications for how medieval Christians thought about their own bodies.⁴¹ Saint George's body came to symbolize the moral protection and supremacy of the Christian faith and white Western European male superiority. The body of the

³⁶ Green, "The Diversity of Human Kind," 170. The category of 'human monster' could include "hermaphrodites, giants, those with extra digits, Ethiopians...satyrs, sirens, centaurs, and various Plinian races."

³⁷ It should be noted, that by bringing the dragon into the pagan city its citizens' deaths were now only preventable *if* they converted from their pagan beliefs to Christianity.

³⁸ Green, "The Diversity of Human Kind," 170-1.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Green, "The Diversity of Human Kind," 163-4.

⁴¹ Kuehn, *The Dragon in Medieval East Christian and Islamic Art*, 109-10.

princess worked as a sign for the city, vulnerability, purity, and the inaction and powerlessness of women in subordination to men and the temptations of sin.⁴² Most importantly, however, the dragon's monstrous body acted as a proxy for the grotesque, the racialized, the feminized, and the pagan. In other words, all those who fell outside European Christian definitions of 'normal' within an ever-expanding medieval world.

⁴² Stuart Hall, "The Work of Representation," in *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*, eds. Stuart Hall and Open University (Thousand Oaks, CA, London: Sage and Open University, 1997) 30-1.

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Illustrations



Figure 1.
Paolo Uccello,
*Saint George
and the
Dragon*. Oil
on canvas,
55.6 x 74.2
cm, ca. 1470.
National
Gallery,
London,
England.
<http://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/painting/s/paolo-uccello-saint-george-and-the-dragon>



Figure 2. *St. George,
with Red Cross
Emblem and Dragon*.
Ink on parchment, 29.3
x 20 cm, ca. 1440-
1450. Bodleian
Library, Oxford,
England.
<http://bodley30.bodley>.