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Aesthetics, Ethnicity, and the History of Art

Paper Jews: Inscription/Ethnicity/Ethnography

Kathleen Biddick

Last summer I encountered two etchings done by Albrecht Altdorfer immediately prior to the destruction of the Regensburg synagogue and the expulsion of its resident Jews by civic order in February 1519 (Figs. 1, 2). His etchings chilled me.¹ I was intrigued by the fact that they were reproduced in a compelling study of his landscapes by Christopher Wood. They can also be found in compendia of Early Renaissance etchings and engravings and in catalogues of Altdorfer's work. Genre, medium, oeuvre—none of these categories suffices to provide a reading practice capable of addressing the gap between these two images. It is between the one study of two Jews standing on the threshold of the Regensburg synagogue and the second of the stripped architectural interior of the synagogue that an aesthetics of disappearance does its work. How can the viewer read such an aesthetics historically and politically?

What I want to do in this essay is to wrench these etchings out of the familiar categories of genre, medium, and oeuvre and relocate them in a history of scientific representation. Thereby it becomes possible to see how the etchings both encode a history of Christian-Jewish ethnic conflict and foreclose on it through “disappearing” Jews. This aesthetics of disappearance deserves attention in the history of scientific representation as a sign of early modern European ethnography, a “science” which grounded itself on the ontological absence of Jews. The Altdorfer etchings can be read as formative and constitutive of this new science. Critique of their ethnography makes it possible to rethink Christian-Jewish ethnic conflict not as something incomprehensible, instinctive, ahistorical, but rather as a genealogy of the power of the “rational” and the “technical.”

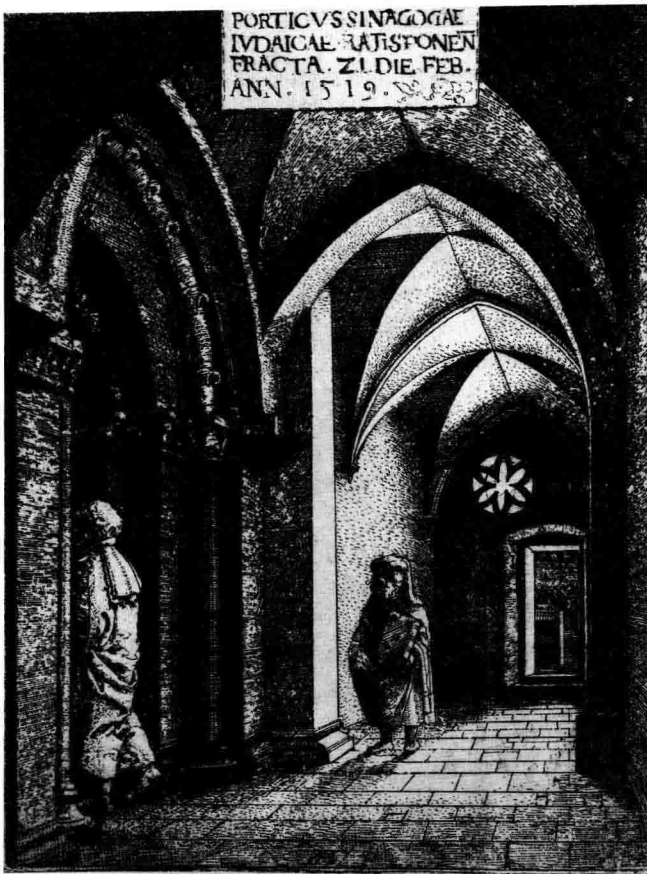
Clues to a history of Christian-Jewish ethnic conflict abound in the etchings, in each of which Altdorfer incorporated an epigraphic plaque. The first inscription reads: PORTICUS SINAGOGAE / IUDICAE RATISPONEN[SIS] / FRACTA 21 DIE FEB. / ANN. 1519 (The porch of the Jewish synagogue at

Regensburg destroyed February 21, 1519). The second reads: ANNO D[OMI]NI D XIX / IUDAICA RATISPONA / SYNAGOGA IUSTO / DEI IUDICIO FUNDIT[U]S EST EVERSA (In the year of the Lord 1519 the Jewish Regensburg synagogue was utterly destroyed by the just judgment of God). The language of the second epigraph in particular struck me. I knew that the formula “iusto dei iudicio” (by the just judgment of God) came from the juridical world of the medieval ordeal, a method of trial in which the accused was exposed to a physical test, such as hot iron or boiling water applied to the flesh, from which he or she, if innocent, would be protected by God. The rendering of the interior of the synagogue also drew on the rich architectural metaphors developed by Christians for discussing circumcision. I knew from my readings of medieval anti-Jewish polemic that the repudiation of circumcision under the New Law, its effacement as an inscription, was imagined in architectural terms. The epigraph's claim “funditus est eversa” (was utterly destroyed) hauntingly echoes traditional commentary on Isaiah 28:16 to be found in anti-Jewish polemic, such as the *Disputatio* by Gilbert Crispin, who compares Christ to the cornerstone of the temple of Sion. As a *carefully hewn* cornerstone Christ “justifies circumcision from the faith and the foreskin through the faith” (“circumcisionem iustificat ex fide et preputium per fidem”).² Altdorfer's epigraphic gesture, the public lettering of the plaques in each print, also pointed to the importance of transmitting a message of civic and monumental knowledge. Together, these clues suggested to me that the prints worked as a montage condensing the juridical world of the ordeal, the ritual of circumcision, and the work of public writing. To read against an aesthetics of disappearance would thus entail opening gaps in between these various superimpositions, showing their sutures.

What follows is an ethnic genealogy that materializes the space of disappearance in between the two Altdorfer etchings. By the end of the essay this space of disappearance will fold into origami. To assemble this paper sculpture, fold the porch of the synagogue (Fig. 1) to become the inside of a crypt and then roll out the second etching (Fig. 2) to become the slab to be placed over that crypt. As the origami is finished, the slab becomes the surface of inscription upon

1. My thanks to the Rockefeller Foundation and to Jim Clifford and colleagues at the Center for Cultural Studies (University of California at Santa Cruz) for the sabbatical opportunity to think about ethnography (1994). I am grateful to my colleague Graham Hammill for his suggestions about gesture, to Kerry Walk, as ever, for her rigor and enthusiasm, and to Andrea Roth for her work obtaining the reproductions for this essay. The students in my spring seminar, 1996, “Becoming Inquisitorial: Discipline/Technology,” provided inspiration for this paper to which I am indebted: Gabriel Ash, Scott Baier, Christine Caldwell, Justin Cole, Dan Hobbins, David Mengel, Kevin Rousseau, and Sarah Soja. I can only briefly acknowledge here the discursive literature which deeply engages this essay. On Christian-Jewish polemic, see B. Blumenkranz, *Disputatio Iudei et Christiani* Gilberti Crispini,

Antwerp, 1956; Petrus Alfonsi in *Pat. Lat.*, CLVII, cols. 527–672; and John Tolan, *Petrus Alfonsi and His Medieval Readers*, Gainesville, Fla., 1993. See also Anna Sapir Abulafia, “Bodies in the Jewish-Christian Debates,” in *Framing Medieval Bodies*, ed. Sarah Kay and Miri Rubin, Manchester, 1994, 124–37; Miri Rubin, “The Person in the Form: Medieval Challenges to Bodily Order,” in *Framing Medieval Bodies*, 100–122; and Gilbert Dahan, *La Polémique chrétienne contre le Judaïsme au Moyen Âge*, Paris, 1991. On ordeal and inquest, and here only a starting point, see Howard Bloch, *Medieval French Literature and Law*, Berkeley, 1977; Talal Asad, “Pain and Truth in Medieval Christian Ritual,” in *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam*, Baltimore, 1993, 83–124; and Robert Bartlett, *Trial by Fire and*



1 Albrecht Altdorfer, *Porch of the Regensburg Synagogue*, 1519. Berlin, Kupferstichkabinett (photo: Bildarchiv Preussischer Kulturbesitz)



2 Altdorfer, *Interior of the Regensburg Synagogue*, 1519. Berlin, Kupferstichkabinett (photo: Bildarchiv Preussischer Kulturbesitz)

which ethnographers have written disappearance for half a millennium.³ Write graffiti there, read a “history that will be.”

The foreskin is the first clue. Beginning in Late Antiquity, who was circumcised and who was not came to play a crucial role in differentiating Christians and Jews not only theologically, but also ethnically. My story about Christian-Jewish ethnic conflict begins, then, with the rites of Baptism and circumcision and how these rites came to confer ethnic status by virtue of their differentiating inscriptions. Richly discursive and passionately held differences over pleasure, sexual renunciation, and the hierarchy of body and soul came to be polarized around the heart in Baptism and the foreskin in circumcision. Since a graphic struggle over the legibility of these ritual inscriptions of Baptism and circumcision marked

a divide from Late Antiquity, and since the architectural content of the etchings proposes the persistence of this struggle, I am approaching the cultural politics of Christian and Jewish ethnicities as a contest over inscription.

Rites of Baptism and circumcision do not occur in isolation. They are ritual performances of embodiment that take place within wider institutional settings in which questions of what counts as visible and legible are negotiated. Institutions also have their own graphic processes, their own writing machines. A study of ethnic conflict over these inscriptions, therefore, requires a notion of inscription that can account for how a graphic inscribed on the body or soul can travel from that body or soul into institutional networks. Cultural studies of scientific representation, in particular of inscription, offer a way of thinking about such leaps.

Water: The Medieval Judicial Ordeal, Oxford, 1986. Suggestive, too, for problems of inquisitorial writing space and montage are Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, trans. Alan Sheridan, New York, 1979; Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galeta, Minneapolis, 1989; Monique David-Ménard, *Hysteria from Freud to Lacan: Body and Language of Psychoanalysis*, trans. Catherine Porter, Ithaca, N.Y., 1989; Jonathan Goldberg, “The History That Will Be,” *GLQ*, 1, 1995, 385–404; and Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*, Baltimore, 1996.

2. Blumenkrantz (as in n.1), 42.

3. To consider this question, how ethnicity becomes ethnography, through a study of Christian-Jewish inscriptions is to begin rethinking the colonial

discipline of European ethnography as emerging not in an imagined encounter of the Old and New Worlds, but within graphic conflicts between Christians and Jews. For the need to do so, see Daniel Boyarin, “‘Epater l’embourgeoisement’: Freud, Gender and the (De)Colonized Psyche,” *Diacritics*, xxiv, 1994, 17–41; Sander L. Gilman, *Freud, Race, and Gender*, Princeton, N.J., 1993; John M. Efron, *Defenders of the Race: Jewish Doctors and Race Science in Fin-de-Siècle Europe*, New Haven, 1994; Michael Ragussis, *Figures of Conversion: The “Jewish Question” and English National Identity*, Durham, N.C., 1995; Eric L. Santner, *My Own Private Germany: Daniel Paul Schreber’s Secret History of Modernity*, Princeton, N.J., 1996; and James Shapiro, *Shakespeare and the Jews*, New York, 1996.

Bruno Latour, a sociologist of science, thinks of inscription as graphic transformations of things in the world, visible and invisible, such as stars, viruses, genes, bodies, and so on, onto paper (and now onto disk) for the purposes of dissemination. Thus, for example, some aspect of dinosaur locomotion can be graphically rendered and that rendering can be photographed or digitally scanned. The image can then be reproduced in a variety of formats, such as museum exhibits, books, slides, films, videos, T-shirts, which can in turn be disseminated and travel. These traveling inscriptions can be seen and recognized by thousands of viewers and can conscript them into believing in the validity of a particular representation of dinosaurs (say, the kinder, gentler, smarter mammalian dinosaur), a beast, which, after all, no one has actually seen alive. Inscriptions, according to Latour, thus "allow conscriptions" of viewers around representation and are therefore powerful mobilizing tools.⁴

Like the initial artistic rendering of the dinosaur, medieval anti-Jewish polemic, mostly fictionalized accounts of disputes between Christian and Jewish intellectuals, can be regarded as a graphic transformation of the invisible inscription of Baptism on the heart and the visible inscription of circumcision on the foreskin into monastic and university networks where disputes over ethnic legibility were further engaged. A brief comparison of two of the most popular medieval Christian-Jewish disputations, namely Petrus Alfonsi's *Dialogi contra Iudaeos* (1108–10) and Gilbert Crispin's *Disputatio Iudaei et Christiani* (ca. 1096), shows how such translations operate to construct networks of inscriptions organized around ethnic conflicts over the legibility of Baptism and circumcision.

In the prologue to Crispin's *Disputatio*, the reader learns the outcome of the debate between the Christian and the Jew, its "happy ending"—the Jewish interlocutor is baptized in a public ceremony in London and becomes a monk. The very writing of this *Disputatio*, then, constitutes a graphic inscription of Baptism onto the textual body of the Jewish interlocutor. Imagine that Crispin writes his text on the heart of his Jewish interlocutor as a way of making the inscription of Baptism visible. Whereas Crispin, as a Christian, works out the problem of Baptism for Jews, Petrus Alfonsi, as a baptized Jew, works out the problem of both Baptism and circumcision in his *Dialogi*, disputing with his former Jewish self, which he enfold in the persona of Moses. He uses scientific arguments and, what is important, for the first time in this polemical genre, scientific diagrams, in order to discredit Moses and his talmudic knowledge for its irrationality.⁵ These diagrams are not only scientific inscriptions; they also work to cover over Alfonsi's circumcision. Alfonsi inscribes these scientific diagrams like tattoos over the visible "writing" of his circumcision, thereby rendering circumcision an illegible inscription that cannot be linked to "sci-

ence." Scientific diagrams render visible the invisible graphic of his Baptism.

Alfonsi's strategy of using diagram and text linked his polemic not only into theological networks but into scientific ones as well. Ethnic conflict thus traveled to new audiences. Not surprisingly, it was the most widely disseminated text among medieval Christian-Jewish polemics precisely because it combined sought-after scientific diagrams with polemic over ethnic inscription.⁶ In contrast, the Crispin *Disputatio* contains no diagrams. It matched the popularity of the Alfonsi text in the twelfth century (with twenty-two manuscripts), but then interest tailed off quickly with only seven copies produced in the thirteenth century and only two copies in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. It would seem that the lack of diagrams in Crispin's *Disputatio* constrained its circulation to a narrower temporal and pietistic network and thereby dampened its effect on ethnic conflict.

So far I have tried to show how the genre of anti-Jewish polemic came to translate a Christian-Jewish conflict over corporeal inscription into graphic forms that, as a mobilizing tool, could circulate widely beyond the body, thus significantly expanding the discursive field. There were, however, important inscriptional limits to how long the chain of translation could become in twelfth-century Christendom. The dead end lay with the all-important link to the juridical writing machine of the day, the ordeal, a form of proof which relied on hot water, hot irons, or immersion to determine the guilt or innocence of the accused in cases where normal juridical procedures, most notably compurgation, the sworn endorsement of friends and neighbors of the accused, were not deemed applicable.

The second plaque of the Altdorfer etching superimposes the language of the ordeal on the empty, stripped space of the interior of the Regensburg synagogue. The epigraphy, its chiseled quality, insistently reminds that inscription played a crucial role in the ordeal. Hot water or the hot iron "inscribed" the hand of the accused with signs to be read and interpreted for guilt or innocence. The chief ritual parallel for the ordeal was Baptism; indeed, in Old Norse the word for ordeal and Baptism are the same. The limitation of the ordeal, however, lay in its inability to translate the wound or scar of the hot water or iron into a graphic that could be disseminated more widely in inscriptional networks. The ordeal could only inscribe around ritual and could not be produced as disseminating inscription. Just as Crispin's *Disputatio* was limited to the ritual performance of Baptism of the Jewish interlocutor in London, so ordeal was confined by its corporeal writing pad. These limitations traced a perimeter to the discursive field of ethnic conflict.

The inquest, which came to replace ordeal by fiat of the prelates gathered at the Fourth Lateran Council convened in

4. Bruno Latour, "Drawing Things Together," in *Representation in Scientific Practice*, ed. Michael Lynch and Stephen Woolgar, Cambridge, 1990, 50.

5. For bibliography and more detailed explication of the Alfonsi *Dialogi* and subsequent layering of inscriptions in medieval mappaemundi, travel literature, and Ptolemaic maps, see Kathleen Biddick, "ABC of Ptolemy: Mapping the World with the Alphabet," in *Text and Territory*, ed. Sylvia Tomasch and Sealy Gilles, Philadelphia, 1997, forthcoming.

6. Alfonsi's *Dialogi* continued to be copied through the 15th century (21 copies in the 12th century; 24 copies in the 13th; 14 copies in the 14th; 18 copies in the 15th). In only two instances were the Alfonsi and Crispin polemics bound together.

7. For the Latin text and translation, see canons 8 ("De inquisitionibus"/"On inquests") and 18 ("De iudicio sanguinis et duelli clericis interdicto"/"On sentences involving either the shedding of blood or a duel being

1215, breached the perimeter.⁷ Whereas in the ordeal hot iron or hot water “wrote” the corporeal inscription, in the inquest the main gesture was notarial writing: a notary was always present to commit the oral proceedings to parchment or later to paper, thus producing an official record written most often in Latin before 1450. Put another way, inquisitorial process *translated* the corporeal writing pad of the ordeal into the trial record, which was a portable graphic that could be extracted, stored, copied, and circulated.

The practice of the inquest became incorporated into the inquisitorial procedures of the Church not long after the Fourth Lateran Council. The graphic practices of the inquisition transformed and intensified the conflict over inscription between Christians and Jews by multiplying the possibilities of translation and thus extending the chain of the inscriptional network.⁸ Also key to understanding this reframing of inscriptional conflict is medieval torture, the threat of which was necessary to inquisition, and the practice of which predictably accompanied its spread. Torture raises the important question of the relation of the textual bodies produced by the notary’s writing hand and the sentient bodies enduring pain in the torture chamber. Is the tortured body to be thought of as the body of the ordeal displaced by the notarial writing hand? This question, I think, is also relevant to reading the etchings. Are the Jews in the porch of the synagogue in the first etching to be thought of as the body of the ordeal (to which the plaque of the second etching refers) displaced by the etching hand of Altdorfer?

The answer to this question is no, since the question misunderstands notarial writing in the inquisition, and, as I shall further show, misrepresents the Altdorfer etching. Inquisitorial writing produced textual bodies in a writing space that works like a montage, in which different and discontinuous spaces exist simultaneously and collide. If we think of the O. J. Simpson trial, we know that the trial witnessed by the jury was very different from the trial witnessed by television viewers. We might say that the jury occupied a different, noncontinuous space literally and conceptually. Similarly, the space in which inquisitorial writing took place, conceptually speaking, was also different and noncontinuous from the space of both the accused and the tortured. There is no unity of gesture and situation in the inquisitorial writing space. These disjunctures, this issue of montage, sharply question the traditional ways in which medieval historians have read and interpreted inquisitorial trial transcripts and should enhance our understanding of how inquisitions inscribed and disseminated the inscription of Baptism in the Christian-Jewish competition over ethnicity.

Two inquisition cases will show how the inquisitorial writing space worked and also how the gesture of inquisitorial writing actually produced the graphic of ritual during the

course of these trials. First, take the famous trial in 1320 of Baruch, a noted rabbi, in the court of Jacques Fournier, bishop of Pamiers, the future Pope Benedict XII.⁹ This inquisition revolved around the question of whether or not Baruch’s Baptism under the threat of death at the hands of marauding Pastorelli was authentic or forced. Without the trial the status of Baruch’s Baptism would remain in question, illegible. The question then is one of inscription. How can an inquisition decide legibility?

The bishop draws up the sides in this inquisition. He insists, in outright contradiction of Baruch’s confession, that there was no absolute force (“coactione absoluta”) involved in his Baptism; therefore, Baruch is obliged by law and reason (“secundem iura et rationem”) to concur in his Baptism; otherwise the bishop will proceed against him as an obstinate heretic. An uncanny, elliptical disjuncture then ensues in the trial record. At this point the different and noncontinuous spaces of the inquest collide as the bishop engages Baruch in a lengthy disputation, similar in genre to that of Alfonsi and Crispin. The collision, however, transforms the disputation from a polemic to a trial by battle. Here we have a montage that produces the bishop and Baruch as armed contestants. In the gap between the writing space and the accused, the ritual of the duel over inscription takes place.

To make a long disputation short, Baruch “loses” the judicial combat. He then swears that the persecution which resulted in his Baptism was for the good of his soul; he now believes from the heart. The bishop “wins” the efficacy of the trial record to render legible the inscription of Baptism on the heart of Baruch. If one wanted to find graphic evidence of Baruch’s Baptism, one would revert not to his body but to the trial record. The inquisition produced illegible or invisible inscriptions as visible and legible graphics that then reside in archived inquisitorial registers, which could and did travel.

Trial records were not only handwritten; extracts and versions of trial records were also printed after the 1450s. Remember, too, that Altdorfer, who worked in a variety of print and nonprint media, chose etching, a print medium, for his renderings of the Regensburg synagogue. Did print technology refigure yet again the inscriptional conflict between Christians and Jews? The Trent ritual-murder trial of 1475 offers an important example of the imbrication of inquisition with print culture. The trial record, constructed from the torture and interrogation of eighteen Trent Jews, narrates the details of an alleged ritual murder, including bleeding, mutilation, and circumcision, of a Christian child named Simon. Figure 3 is just one example of the printed images that circulated along with printed as well as handwritten versions of the Trent trial record. It depicts, in the crowded and seemingly medicalized space of the medieval

forbidden to clerics”), in Norman P. Tanner, ed., *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, Washington, D.C., 1990, 236–39, 244.

8. For the importance of the gender and sexuality of inquisitorial inscription, see Kathleen Biddick, “The Devil’s Anal Eye: Inquisitorial Optics and Ethnographic Authority,” in *Medievalism in Fragments*, Durham, N.C., 1997, forthcoming.

9. The Baruch trial can be found in *Le Registre d’inquisition de Jacques Fournier (1318–1325)*, ed. Jean Duvernoy, Toulouse, 1965; for the Trent trial, see Anna Esposito and Diego Quaglioni, *Processi contro gli Ebrei di Trento (1475–1478)*, Padua, 1990; and R. Po-Chia Hsia, *Trent, 1475: Stories of a Ritual Murder Trial*, New Haven, 1992.



3 Artist unknown (probably Florentine), *Ritual Murder of Simon of Trent*, ca. 1475–85, engraving (from Arthur M. Hind, *Early Italian Engraving*, pt. 1, New York, 1938, II, pl. 74; photo: Getty Center)

barber, the body of a little male Christian patient/victim spread out on a table. Jewish barbers/torturers pinch his flesh, draw his blood, and circumcise him. This engraving offers important evidence of yet another layer of translation of inscriptional conflict, a translation from the torture chamber to the world of the reader of printed books and collector of "holy images."

The relays of this translation from torture chamber to printed image are worth pausing over. In the torture chamber at Trent, Christians tortured Jews. In the engraving, Jews become torturers; one brandishes the knife of circumcision. Their victim is a Christian. The tortured bodies of the Jews of Trent are translated by the illustrator into the graphic body of Simon Martyr; the graph of their circumcision inscribes itself onto the little boy's body, just as the hot water and hot iron of the ordeal inscribed itself on the accused. The engraving turns both the sacrament of Baptism and the torture room inside out. The proliferation of woodcuts and engravings depicting the Trent trial and the boy martyr Simon extended the writing space of the inquisition into the reading space of the viewer; montage is becoming more encompassing.

The violence of the Simon images, their double graphic of a baptized boy being circumcised, tells us about the terror of

Christians at their own violence/pleasure. Such inquisitions are not really about "knowledge" but about pleasure, a pleasure that denies its violence and claims it as knowledge. Pleasure and knowledge of inquisition collapse into each other in the Trent engraving and make it impossible to acknowledge "the other's defiance, which is what encounter consists of."¹⁰ The Trent engraving teeters on the edge of ethnography, where the ontological absence of Jews becomes a new writing surface.

We have seen that the inquisition, as a writing machine, multiplied the graphic sites of contest over Christian-Jewish inscription, since the inscribed bodies produced by inquisition could be reproduced in other media and disseminated even more widely. The inquisition thus extended the possibilities for chains of inscriptions, ever broadening the discursive field of ethnic conflict. The inquisitorial writing machine worked as a graphic apparatus for performing ritual at a distance, something we have seen that the ordeal could not do.

I would now like to return to the Altdorfer etchings in order to ask whether printing itself had become constitutive of ethnic conflict by the end of the fifteenth century. The answer to this question is crucial to the transformation of ethnic conflict into ethnography.¹¹ The Altdorfer etchings

10. David-Ménard (as in n. 1), 183; also, crucial to the question of pleasure/knowledge/violence, see Louise O. Fradenburg and Carla Freccero, "The Pleasures of History," *GLQ*, 1, 1995, 373–84.

11. A very important question has not yet been asked and cannot be dealt with adequately here. How did Jews engage in these inscriptional contests? At this juncture the complex story of Hebrew printing in Europe needs to be considered. In brief, 1475, the year of the Trent trial, coincided with the first publication of Hebrew incunabula in Pieve in the shadow of Padua, less than one hundred miles from Trent, as well as the first printing of Hebrew script in non-Hebrew texts in Germany. In the last quarter of the 15th century Hebrew printers could be found in the smaller provincial cities of Mantua, Ferrara, Bologna, Soncino, near Milan, Naples, and Brescia. Noted Hebrew printers

such as Gerson Soncino also printed Latin and vernacular texts. Venice came to be the major site of Hebrew printing under David Bomberg, a Christian publisher from Antwerp who worked with Jewish scholars in his printing house. Such operations were always vulnerable and the Venetian republic exacted a high cost. Bomberg had to pay extortionate fees to extend his permission to print Hebrew texts, and the ambivalent attitude to Hebrew publishing flared in 1553, when a papal order condemned printed Talmuds to burning. As a starting point, consult Paul F. Grendler, *The Roman Inquisition and the Venetian Press, 1540–1605*, Princeton, N.J., 1977; and David Werner Amram, *The Makers of Hebrew Books in Italy*, London, 1973.

12. Johannes Fabian, *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes Its Object*, New York, 1983.

teach us the strength to be found in conscription through inscription. Altdorfer translates graphic Jews into architectural space. Their absence becomes the formal presence of “perspectival” architecture. This translation marks an important shift in register from ethnicity to ethnography. Ethnography is that writing space where others are reduced to ontological absence.¹² Altdorfer’s very act of etching architectural space, rendering the synagogue as an architectural study, becomes constitutive of a new discourse, ethnography. The architectural space etched by Altdorfer forecloses further ethnic conflict over circumcision between Christians and Jews. In so doing, the etching effaces the inscription of circumcision—violent pleasure has become the “knowledge” of space itself. Architectural rendering as a new category of representation covers over the cut foreskin.

The etchings produce something new, a crypt. It is on that stone surface that the ethnographer Altdorfer inscribes his new ethnography, which he signs with his monogram. His ethnography is not about contested ethnic co-presence of Christians and Jews, but the narcissism of the Same; the conflict is resolved.

I have argued that bodily inscriptions of Baptism and circumcision and the cascades of graphic translations which passed through such diverse media as polemic, torture chambers, and engravings and etchings came to constitute Christian-Jewish ethnic relations at the level of the printed graphic itself. By implication I am saying that printing not only represented this contest but actually came to constitute it. As such, graphic inscriptions signifying ethnic conflict between Christians and Jews linked together cascades of discursive networks. Altdorfer’s architectural translation might then be read not only as the new writing surface of ethnography but also as the crypt in which Christians finally buried the foreskin, thus foreclosing the possibility of mourning the loss of corporeal inscription which Paul had disavowed so many centuries earlier. This crypt, its graphic materiality, has served as a site of European ethnographic authority for half a millennium. Its staunch resistance to brilliant postcolonial critiques should give us pause and urge us to think more attentively about the aesthetics of disappearance and the work of mourning.

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“Just Like Us”: Cultural Constructions of Sexuality and Race in Roman Art

John R. Clarke

One of the greatest difficulties plaguing the study of Roman art is the persistent notion that the Romans were “just like us.” This problematic idea forms the premise and subtext of five centuries of classical studies. If the Renaissance had a deep stock in establishing the legitimacy of early capitalist/bourgeois conceptions of the humanist individual through the study of classical texts, it was because the legitimation of princely politics and ethics required a powerful precedent—no less authoritative and powerful than the fabled Roman empire. Renaissance humanists looked to Cicero, Vergil, and Livy for ways to define the early modern state. Subsequent attempts to legitimate the prince, the absolute monarch, colonialism, nineteenth-century nationalism, and—finally and most terrifyingly—German and Italian fascism, always went back to the ancient Romans, to those same texts with their histories of emperors and empire, their great lawyers, statesmen, rhetoricians, moralists, and poets.

Late twentieth-century Euro-American culture is in many ways the end product of centuries of adaptation of ancient Roman texts and cultural artifacts to fit the requirements of an increasingly capitalist, bourgeois, and colonial system. If the Romans seem to be in all things so much like “us,” it is because “we” have colonized their time in history. (In this essay I use the words “we” and “us” to denote the white, male elite of Euro-American culture—the person I perceive to be the dominant voice in traditional scholarship.) We have appropriated their world to fit the needs of our ideology.

A revolution has occurred in the study of classical texts, one that has challenged those five centuries of scholarship. On one front, feminist scholars have challenged and problematized the sources in their search for that elusive person, the Roman woman.¹ All the texts that have survived, written either by elite white males or by men working for them, construct—that is, make up—women. Both the poet and the jurist put words in their mouths and devise their actions, whether vile or virtuous. One will search in vain for a woman’s commentary on the condition of women of any class, although by deconstructing texts scholars have succeeded in extrapolating information about the elite woman: her legal and marital status, social mores, and political power. Harder to track are the nonelite women—the greatest number of them invisible because they are ciphers, both juridically and socially: these include free nonelite women, former slaves, slaves, foreigners, and outcasts (*infames*) like prostitutes.

A second route of inquiry has tried to recover the diversity of people in the Roman empire by applying the models

1. For three recent collections of essays, see Nancy Sorkin Rabinowitz and Amy Richlin, eds., *Feminist Theory and the Classics*, New York, 1993, bibl. after each essay and 305–7; Elaine Fantham et al., *Women in the Classical World: Image and Text*, New York, 1994, bibl. after each essay; and Richard Hawley and Barbara Levick, eds., *Women in Antiquity: New Assessments*, New York, 1995, bibl. 248–64.



1 Pompeii, House of Caecilius Iucundus, peristyle, *Couple on Bed with Servant*. Naples Archaeological Museum, inv. 110569 (photo: Michael Larvey)

developed in sociology, economics, cultural anthropology, and geography (including urban studies and population analysis). The picture that has emerged is that of an empire loosely organized indeed. Once the Romans had conquered various peoples of the Mediterranean, they tried to rule with the lightest possible touch, preferring the laissez-faire accommodations of religious syncretism, local rule, and vassal (puppet) kings to the heavy-handed direct policing that was so expensive to maintain. As long as a town or province paid its taxes to Rome and maintained a modicum of civil order, Rome was happy to let indigenous cultures continue. Again, it seems that modern ideologies have required Roman rule to be more all-encompassing than it was in reality.²

If application of the methodologies of feminist scholarship and the social sciences has begun to expand the tunnel-vision optic of traditional classical studies of Rome, what can the study of visual representation accomplish? Central to any project using Roman visual arts to understand ancient Roman people is the realization that whereas texts addressed the elite, art addressed everybody. From official imperial art

to the wall paintings in a Pompeian house, Roman art consciously embraced a far broader audience than the texts. My recent work has focused on two specialized genres of Roman art, images of human lovemaking and representations of the black African, in an effort to understand the nonelite viewer, the female viewer, and even the non-Roman viewer.³ It is from this work that I would like to draw two illustrations of how contextual readings of visual representations reveal the great differences between Roman culture and our own.

The typical literature on sexual representation in Roman art presents a variety of imagery in many media—from wall paintings to ceramics and metalwork—under the rubric of “erotic” art.⁴ Authors then try to tack texts onto photographs of these representations: the reader sees a photograph of a satyr and maenad copulating on one page, and on the facing page an excerpt from Ovid’s *Art of Love*. Never mind that the painting came from the wall of a house in Pompeii; that it dates from one hundred years later than Ovid’s poem; that the couple is mythical, not human; and that Ovid was writing poetry for the elite whereas the viewer of this painting may have been illiterate. Yet with few exceptions studies of Roman so-called erotic art have assumed that Roman visual representations illustrated texts and that texts “document” Roman sexuality. Erudite studies of Latin words for sexual positions claim to find corroboration in wall paintings, lamps, even the coinlike *spintriae*—all considered without regard to their architectural contexts or dates.⁵

If we turn the tables and begin with the context of visual representations of lovemaking, surprising results emerge. We begin to understand how what seems to be erotic—by which I mean an image meant to stimulate a person sexually—had a totally different meaning for the ancient Roman viewer. A good case in point is the painting (dated A.D. 62–79) cut from a wall of the House of Caecilius Iucundus at Pompeii (Fig. 1). Antonio Sogliano, who excavated this large residence in 1875, deemed it obscene and had it carted off to the infamous Pornographic Collection of the Naples Archaeological Museum. (To this day this room, filled with mosaics, wall paintings, and small objects, remains barred to the public.) Yet consideration of the original location of the picture, along with aspects of its imagery, indicates that it was the pride of the owner’s house: it spelled “status,” not “sex.”

The owner was a freedman who had enlarged the house to make four dining rooms. The major dining area was the one located on the peristyle; it formed a suite with a luxurious kind of bedroom, one with two niches, immediately to its right. Our “erotic” painting occupied the important space on the peristyle itself between the doorways to these two

2. Peter Garnsey and Richard Saller, *The Roman Empire: Economy, Society, and Culture*, Berkeley, 1987, synthesize much of the current revisionist scholarship.

3. See John R. Clarke, “Hypersexual Black Men in Augustan Baths: Ideal Somatotypes and Apotropaic Magic,” in Natalie B. Kampen, ed., *Sexuality in Ancient Art*, Cambridge, 1996, 184–98; and idem, *Looking at Lovemaking: Sexuality in Roman Art—Constructions, 100 B.C.–A.D. 250*, Berkeley, forthcoming.

4. This pattern was set up in Jean Marcadé, *Roma Amor: Essay on Erotic Elements in Etruscan and Roman Art*, Geneva, 1965; and idem, *Eros Kalos: Essay on Erotic Elements in Greek Art*, Geneva, 1965. A particularly lamentable recent

example of the text/image pastiche is *Eros grec: Amour des dieux et des hommes*, exh. cat., Paris, Grand Palais, Athens, 1989.

5. This approach, pioneered in Gaston Vorberg, *Glossarium Eroticum*, Stuttgart, 1932, continues in Werner Krenkel, “Figurae Veneris,” *Wissenschaftliche Zeitschrift der Wilhelm-Pieck-Universität Rostock*, xxxiv, 1985, 50–57.

6. Arnold de Vos, “Casa di Cecilio Giocondo,” in *Pompei pitture e mosaici*, iii, Rome, 1991, 575.

7. Aristocrats regularly used cubacula for meetings with peers or their social betters. The ancient literature includes five instances of Romans receiving friends in cubiculo, three of their conducting business there, and four of

rooms. Modern scholars, ignoring both the culture of Roman entertainment and the meaning of the picture itself, have assumed that the painting designated the bedroom as a place for a tryst after dining.⁶

We associate bedrooms with sleeping and sexual intimacy; the ancient Romans also used well-appointed bedrooms to entertain guests of a status equal to or higher than their own. The entire Roman house was a place of business; a guest's entrance into a fine cubiculum like this one depended entirely upon his status.⁷ This room is not, then, about "privacy"—a concept that does not exist in Roman language or thought—but about high status.

Examination of the painting itself shows that the painter was striving to create an image of upper-class luxury. There is a couple on a richly outfitted bed. The woman holds her hand behind her, whether to conceal her desire to touch the man or to locate him is not clear. He lifts his arm as though in entreaty, but she cannot see this gesture. A nice touch is the way his left hand curves up at the wrist, allowing the artist to show his virtuosity in depicting delicate fingers. The viewer sees these details but the woman does not, allowing the person who looks at this scene of lovemaking to understand the man's entreaty and the woman's hesitation in a way that the woman—and perhaps her lover also—cannot. In effect, the artist created these nuances of viewing to implicate the viewer as a voyeur. He also included the bedroom servant, the *cubicularius*, to underscore that this was not a poor man's bedroom. He even applied gold to highlight the opulence of fabrics and jewelry. These are all marks of wealth, luxury, and sophistication, similar to the paintings representing lovemaking from the famous villa of the early Augustan period found in Rome under the garden of the Farnesina.⁸

The painting was part of an extensive redecoration campaign with a pointed iconographical program.⁹ The adjacent dining room received a refined decorative scheme, including mythological pictures of the Judgment of Paris and Theseus Abandoning Ariadne.¹⁰ Someone entering the cubiculum would have seen relatively large figures at the center of the walls in front, to the right, and to the left. The room's principal image was a group of Mars and Venus with a figure of Cupid standing in the panel to the right. Bacchus presided over the right wall; on the left wall stood the muse Erato. It seems clear that the artist intended to expand the theme of lovemaking from the human to the divine by associating the vision of aristocratic dalliance in the peristyle panel with an image of passion stirring the quintessential divine lovers, Mars and Venus, in the main panel of the cubiculum. Wine and song, personified by Bacchus and Erato, muse of love poetry, furthered this iconography of amorous pleasures.



2 Pompeii, House of the Menander, entryway to *caldarium*, *Bath Attendant* (photo: Michael Larvey)

This contextual analysis demonstrates that rather than having an erotic function, the painting of lovemaking in the House of Caecilius Iucundus was a sign for the upper-class pretensions of the owner. Like Trimalchio, the wealthy former slave of Petronius's *Satyricon* who delights in explaining his pictures to his (bored) guests,¹¹ the L. Caecilius Iucundus who dined in this triclinium must have felt a glow of pride when a guest recognized the refinement of his iconographical program, uniting the image of upper-class human lovemaking with the divine pair of Mars and Venus in the cubiculum and the heroic panels of the triclinium. This "erotic" picture was about luxury, not lust.

In an era that advocates study of ethnic, racial, and cultural diversity, it would seem natural to turn to the great melting pot that was ancient Rome to understand how this culture constructed the Other. Again, there is the danger of oversimplification and transference of our Anglo-European culture onto the ancient Romans.¹² Careful contextual study reveals combinations of racial stereotypes and belief systems so different from our own that they simply boggle the late twentieth-century mind.

The excavator who discovered the mosaic of a black bath servant in the 1930s was content to identify him as an ithyphallic pygmy (Fig. 2).¹³ The figure occupies the entryway to the *caldarium* in the House of the Menander. The

emperors holding trials *intra cubiculum*; see Andrew Wallace-Hadrill, *Houses and Society in Pompeii and Herculaneum*, Princeton, N.J., 1995, 17, n. 2.

8. Irene Bragantini and Mariette de Vos, *Le decorazioni della villa romana della Farnesina*, Museo Nazionale Romano, II, pt. 1: *Le pitture*, Rome, 1982, pls. 40, 51, 85, 86, 96, 172.

9. See August Mau, "I scavi di Pompei," *Bullettino dell'Istituto di Corrispondenza Archeologica*, 1876, 149–51, 161–68, 223–32, 241–42, for a description of the now-destroyed or removed paintings.

10. Naples, Archaeological Museum, inv. 115396; see de Vos (as in n. 6), fig. 74; and Mau (as in n. 9), 226.

11. Frescoes greet Trimalchio's guests: a trompe-l'oeil painting of a dog

(with the legend CAVE CANEM—"Beware of the Dog") and the story of his life told through allegories of divine intervention (Petron., *Sat.*, 29). Trimalchio interprets the Zodiac in an elaborate dish served to his guests (39); offers a ridiculous iconographical explanation of the imagery in his silver vessels (52); and orders up the iconographical program for his tomb (71).

12. A case of such oversimplification is Frank M. Snowden, Jr., *Before Color Prejudice*, Cambridge, Mass., 1983, who argues that there was no "color prejudice" toward blacks in classical antiquity.

13. Amedeo Maiuri, *La casa del Menandro e il suo Tesoro di Argenteria*, Rome, 1933, I, 146.

composition of heraldic strigils framing an ointment jar on a chain fills the outer side of the entryway composition, so that it was the first image that the visitor saw as he or she passed from the dressing room (*apodyterium*) to the *caldarium*. The man carries water vessels (*askoi*), identifying him as a bath attendant; he wears a kind of short kilt that rides above his enormous penis. A laurel wreath crowns his head. Although he is technically macrophallic (i.e., having an unusually large penis) rather than ithyphallic (i.e., with an erect penis), his identification as a pygmy is the more serious error. Images of the pygmy go back to the sixth century B.C.: artists made them short in stature, with large heads in relation to their bodies, the males usually macrophallic.¹⁴ The bath attendant has a different body type. Most important, the artist has differentiated him from the pygmy by giving him normal proportions. The mosaicist used a saw-tooth configuration of black tesserae to indicate his tightly curled hair. Investigation of comparable images of black men in Roman art of the period (the mosaic has a firm date of 40–20 B.C.) establishes that the artist has represented not the mythical pygmy but the real-life Aethiops, a man from the African continent belonging to a racial and ethnic group attested in contemporary texts and visual representations.¹⁵ Since artists made him macrophallic only in certain sculptures and mosaics, contextual study alone can clarify the meaning of this image.

The bath attendant is poised at the entryway to the hot room of a private bath in a luxurious Pompeian house belonging to an elite family. For the ancient Roman, this circumstance explains the image: it is a representation with two context- and culture-specific purposes: to warn the bather of the dangers of the superheated floor of the room he or she is entering, and to dispel the evil eye through laughter.

The Aethiops is a logical sign to warn the bather about heat because the Romans believed that the Aethiops's black skin came from being burned by the sun. Because of this belief, the Aethiops became a metonym for extreme heat.¹⁶ (Similarly, mosaic images of sandals also appear at the entryways to hot rooms of baths to warn the bather to protect his or her feet from getting burned.)

More complex and difficult for us to understand is our bath attendant's apotropaic function. Ancient Romans believed that the envious person (the *phthoneros* or *invidus*) could cause illness, physical harm, and even death by

focusing his or her eye on the person whom he or she envied. Although there were many theories on just how such harm could come to a person without physical contact, most believed that the *invidus* was able to focus this grudging malice through his or her eye; this so-called evil eye emanated particles that surrounded and entered its unfortunate victim.¹⁷ A person could encounter the envious evil eye anywhere, but was particularly susceptible in baths and at passageway spaces, such as doorways. People wore amulets on their persons, and artists frequently put symbolic images on floors or walls of dangerous, liminal spaces. These *apotropaia* in mosaic and fresco included the representation of the evil eye itself attacked by spears, scorpions, dogs, and the like, as well as images of the erect phallus, sometimes in conjunction with the vagina. In the first instance the image enacts direct aggression against the evil eye; in the second it invokes male and female fertility, the life force, for protection from death.

By making the oversize phallus the attribute of the Aethiops, our mosaic adds yet another apotropaic element: *ἀτοπία*, or "unbecomingness." The bath servant is "unbecoming" and therefore quite funny because he is outside the somatic norms of the Roman elite. Unbecomingness dispelled the evil eye with laughter.¹⁸

The male Aethiops is not always a comic figure in Roman art; the key to understanding Roman elite attitudes toward him lies in defining what were their norms of ideal male beauty. Briefly, an ideally beautiful man would be of the Caucasian race, of medium stature, with an olive complexion and wavy brown hair. Tall, blond or red-headed Germans were as foreign to this ideal somatotype as the Aethiops.¹⁹ So were men with large penises.²⁰ It comes as no surprise that our bath attendant makes the perfect *apotropaion*. He is the comic reversal of accepted standards of male beauty, and his large penis makes him doubly effective against the evil eye.

Just as in the case of the seemingly erotic picture, the mosaic of the bath attendant seems hypersexual or "racist" only to the modern viewer, who lacks the requisite cultural conditioning and belief systems. Analysis of these images in terms of their contemporary cultural contexts means giving them back the efficacy and power that they held for the ancient viewer. In my opinion it is the art historian's job to empower visual representation by putting objects that have become "orphans" back in their rightful cultural homes.

14. For the iconography of the pygmy in Greek myth, see Véronique Dasen, *Dwarfs in Ancient Egypt and Greece*, Oxford, 1993, 182–91.

15. The most comprehensive coverage is Jean Vercoutter et al., *The Image of the Black in Western Art: 1. From the Pharaohs to the Fall of the Roman Empire*, New York, 1976; see also Frank M. Snowden, Jr., *Blacks in Antiquity*, Cambridge, Mass., 1970.

16. For a full discussion of the evidence, in both Greek and Roman authors, for this environmental theory of color, see Snowden (as in n. 15), 2–3, 172–74. See also Jehan Desanges, review of Lloyd Thompson, *Romans and Blacks*, Norman, Okla., 1989, *Revue des Etudes Latines*, LXXVIII, 1990, 233.

17. M. W. Dickie and Katherine M. D. Dunbabin, "Invidia rumpantur pectora: The Iconography of Phthonos/Invidia in Graeco-Roman Art," *Jahrbuch für Antike und Christentum*, xxvi, 1983, 10–11.

18. Doro Levi, "The Evil Eye and the Lucky Hunchback," in *Antioch-on-the-Orontes*, ed. Richard Stillwell, III, Princeton, N.J., 1941, 225. Luca Giuliani, "Der seligen Krüppel: Zur Deutung von Mißgestalten in der hellenistischen Kleinkunst," *Archäologische Anzeiger*, 1987, 701–21, sees images of physically deformed people less as charms against the evil eye than as vehicles to remind people of their own good fortune and well-being. It is possible that

the artist created another reference to the apotropaic phallus, this time within a vagina, in the arrangement of heraldic strigils on either side of the ointment jar on a string that immediately precedes the image of the bath attendant. In a visual pun, the ointment jar becomes the phallus, and the strigils the labia of the vagina. A striking parallel for this representation comes from Sousse in Tunisia, where two pubic triangles representing vaginas flank a fish-shaped phallus (see UNESCO, *Tunisia: Ancient Mosaics*, New York, 1962, pl. 21); I owe this observation and reference to Anthony Corbeill.

19. Thompson (as in n. 16), 16–17, 35–36.

20. For the Greek aesthetic preference for men with small penises, see Kenneth J. Dover, *Greek Homosexuality*, Cambridge, Mass., 1978, 125–35; and Timothy J. McNiven, "The Unheroic Penis: Otherness Exposed," *Source*, xv, no. 1, 1995, 10–16. Roman art and literature corroborate and continue this preference: as late as ca. A.D. 400 an author vilifies the emperor Heliogabalus by elaborating on his taste for men with large penises (*Scriptores Historiae Augustae*, *Heliogab.*, 8.6, 12.3, 26.5; for different accounts, see Cassius Dio, *Hist. Rom.*, 80.6, 80.14, 80.15.4; and Herodian, *Historia*, 5.3.7, 5.8.1).