

sequent history of France to the preoccupations of the classical period.

Mitchell B. Merback. *The Thief, the Cross, and the Wheel: Pain and the Spectacle of Punishment in Medieval and Renaissance Europe*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999. 352 pp. + 119 illus. \$42.00. Review by DANIEL BORNSTEIN, TEXAS A&M UNIVERSITY.

Respect for the dignity of the God-man and for an established iconographic tradition combine to impose a certain formalism and restraint on depictions of Christ crucified. Even the suffering Christ of late medieval art, for all his evident pain, still conveys a majestic calm and resignation as he accepts the doom foreordained for him, and for the highest end. No such restraint, however, governed artistic representations of the two thieves crucified with Jesus of Nazareth. Wildly contorted, grossly distorted, broken, writhing, and wracked with unutterable agony, their bodies spoke their pain—indeed, screamed their suffering—from altarpieces and woodcuts, to an audience accustomed to such spectacles of punishment. Of course, no one in late medieval Europe had witnessed an actual crucifixion, since that particular mode of capital punishment had fallen out of use with the fall of the Roman Empire; but crowds did frequent public executions, theaters of cruelty in which condemned criminals suffered and died in nearly every other way the appalling ingenuity of the judiciary could devise. The consequent familiarity with the rituals and spectacle of punitive justice, argues Mitchell Merback, informed both the representation and reception of crucifixion scenes, and fostered “a distinctive mode of *judicial spectatorship*, fretted with the visual habits and devotional attitudes unique to this period” (128). In particular, the hyper-realistic depictions of Calvary so common in northern European art around 1500 tend to show the two thieves with all the signs of bodies broken on the wheel, a gruesome form of execution that would have been all too familiar to both artists and public.

Merback's boldly interdisciplinary approach to this topic draws on legal custom and performance theory, devotional practice and social history, to illuminate a body of visual art. In addressing "issues of audience participation in, and response to, the rituals and spectacle of punishment," he strives "to go beyond the cause and effect juxtapositions of (social) 'context' and (visual) 'text' in order to explore a reciprocal logic, embedded in medieval visuality, that made art and spectacle dialectical halves of the same experiential mode" (129). Merback brings to this task an alert eye and considerable learning, and carries it off with notable success. He writes with great flair, in lush language well suited to the vivid detail of the works he describes. He manages to maintain a tone of empathetic concern for the poor afflicted subjects of these horrendous images, even as he anatomizes their torments. And he makes a convincing case for the continuity "through and between spheres of life that modernity has proclaimed separate: religious devotion, public spectacle, punitive justice and art" (129).

Of course, any work so broadly conceived is bound to test the learning of its author, and Merback stumbles occasionally when he wanders farther afield, as when he reverses the dating of Paul's letters and the gospels (81). He also suffers from an odd verbal habit of reversing his intended meaning: he says that Lucas Cranach the Elder eventually became the scion of a family of painters (13), when what he meant must surely be sire; inverts the distinction between *latria* and *dulia* (49); uses torpor to mean its precise opposite, turbulent energy (72 and 75); and repeatedly asserts that the importance of devotional images can hardly be underestimated (45 and 193), rather than overestimated. On a more serious matter, I wonder about Merback's use of southern texts to describe a process of devotional visualization that is assumed to apply equally to northern art. The art and visual culture of Quattrocento Italy differed significantly from that of northern Europe, and in the examples of Italian crucifixions invoked by Merback, the classicizing formalism of a Mantegna or a Signorelli allows the crucified bodies of Calvary—including the two thieves—a dignity and a stability denied the writhing, tormented figures of Cranach's art.

But all in all, these are minor flaws, and do not seriously impair the value of this compelling and important book. Not the least of its many merits is the way it sensitizes the reader to the sort of connections Merback draws so persuasively and provokes further reflection about art, spectacle, law, and religion. While preparing this review, I happened on an illustration in the legal statutes governing the city of Cortona, in central Italy, depicting the punishment for sodomy: the condemned man is shown hanging by his feet, upside down, in the flames that burn him alive—a humiliating and dehumanizing (as well as especially painful) punishment, and one which (minus the added torment of fire) Merback says was typically reserved for Jews (188-189). Here, *pace* my earlier remarks about the distinction between Italian and northern visual culture, is an image that links the two, and in so doing suggests a visual rhyme between sexual and religious deviance. These harsh images, like the cruel realities to which they refer, are not for the faint of heart or weak of stomach; but they signify too much to be ignored. Mitchell Merback has faced them with unflinching clarity, both intellectual and moral, and we should all be grateful for the delicacy, wisdom, and insight with which he has treated this troubling topic.

Jason Scott-Warren. *Sir John Harington and the Book as Gift*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2001. xii + 273 pp. Review by EUGENE D. HILL, MOUNT HOLYOKE COLLEGE.

Harington once wrote that “of all the Cases I haue loued the *Dative*” (158); and throughout his life he was an inveterate bestower of individualized copies of his works to friends, relations, nobles, and royals. To Jason Scott-Warren has occurred the happy idea of studying Harington’s career through these donated texts. The critic perhaps overstates the surprise that an audience of the twenty-first century will experience at the consistently “self-interested” (16) nature of gifts in the period, not least Harington’s. But there are good stories to be told and critical insight to be derived from this