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Demons and the Making of the Monk: Spiritual Combat in Early Christianity by David Brakke (Review)

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Blumenfeld-Kosinski's choice to focus on the *imaginaire* of the Great Schism is extremely productive; since the book focuses so extensively on visions and prophecies, one might even say it is an inspired choice. One of the most fascinating dimensions of her approach is the way in which it enables exploration of concepts and images across generic boundaries. Her book offers a fresh perspective on a rich period of history as well as on some extremely well-known medieval writers. It also introduced me (and I suspect, will introduce many readers) to less well-known figures and texts; her compelling arguments about such figures and texts will, I hope, prompt further scholarly interest.

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Demons and the Making of the Monk: Spiritual Combat in Early Christianity. By David Brakke. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006. ix + 308 pp. \$49.95

The past twenty-five years have witnessed a remarkable transformation in the way scholars understand and interpret early Christian monasticism. In the wake of the ground-breaking work of social historian Peter Brown, a generation of scholars has emerged for whom the study of Christian monasticism must be approached with a critical awareness of, among other things, issues of gender, power, and social construction. Although this methodological shift has sometimes resulted in a reductionistic reading of monastic experience, it has for the most part yielded a richer, more varied and textured understanding of the early monastic world than we have had before. David Brakke is among the most gifted of this new generation of scholars and is already well known in the field for his astute and original reading of the monastic ethos of Athanasius of Alexandria (*Athanasius and the Politics of Asceticism* [Oxford, 1995]). Brakke turns his considerable skill here to a subject of crucial importance for understanding early Christian monastic spirituality: the monk's battle with the demons.

It is the singular contribution of this outstanding book to lay bare the roots of this important idea and to delineate the astonishing range of expressions to which it gave rise in early monasticism. One of the virtues of Brakke's disciplined historical analysis is that we come to see that neither "spiritual combat," nor "demons" meant one thing in early monastic experience. Rather, there were intricate and subtle differences between and among different authors, schools, and monastic traditions concerning what it meant to struggle with demons. It is Brakke's stated aim to investigate the idea of "spiritual combat" in all its complexity and variety, to understand how theological assumptions, ecclesial location, philosophical orientation, literary genre and other matters affected this crucial idea. But if Brakke is a careful historian, he is not historicist; that is, he is not interested only in situating the idea of "spiritual combat" historically. He wants to interpret it, understand how it came to expression in a range of genres and settings. He wants to understand what it *meant* to the early Christian monks to struggle in this way, with the demons, with God, with oneself. And if he cautions us against importing anachronistic ideas about contemporary psychology into our reading of the early monastic understand-

ing of the demons (about which I will say more below), he neither underestimates nor dismisses the power of the demonic in early Christian monastic life. One might well characterize this work as “historical-phenomenological” in its outlook.

The book is divided into two main sections. Part I, “The Monk in Combat,” consists of an excellent introductory chapter that lays out the main thematic and theoretical issues of the book, and in-depth analyses of works by or about some of the key figures from the early monastic movement—Antony of Egypt, Evagrius of Ponticus, Pachomius, and Shenoute. Part II, charmingly entitled “War Stories,” engages in analysis of key thematic issues arising from the monks’ experience of struggle with the demons: the diversity of stories and literary genres through which tales of spiritual battle came to expression in the first few generations of monastic life (Brakke considers the distinctive stories through which the *History of the Monks*, the *Lausic History* and the *Sayings of the Desert Fathers* imaged and configured spiritual battle); the image of the Ethiopian, through which fears connected to racial and sexual otherness came to be crystallized in the early monastic mind; the complex and ambiguous use of gender to render the demonic; and the role of the demonic in framing the ever shifting debate between Christian monastics and their pagan counterparts.

This brief summary hardly does justice to the complexity and depth of Brakke’s analysis of the texts and figures from the early monastic tradition, or to the real theoretical sophistication that he brings to bear upon his interpretation of this material. But it does reveal something of the book’s larger ambitions, which include rethinking the entire meaning and construction of the demonic within early Christian monastic experience—something that no one before him has attempted—all the while attending assiduously to the utter particularity and diversity with which the Christian monastics gave voice to their experience of the demonic. And it suggests how fruitful it can be, heuristically, to employ the lens of a single idea to probe a movement as diverse and complex as early Christian monasticism.

Brakke is particularly skilled at evaluating the myriad ways in which the language of demonic struggle constellated and gave meaningful symbolic expression to certain chronic concerns of the early Christian monks. The book opens with a compelling example of this, concerning Shenoute, head of the White Monastery in Upper Egypt. Shenoute is struggling with the question of what to do about a group of monks who have committed a grave sin—return them to the monastery after a period of punishment? Or expel them permanently? As he is weighing this question in prayer, a man (dressed as a middle-ranking government official) appears before him and grabs hold of him, apparently ready to attack him in defense of the offending monks. Shenoute asks the man, “what are you,” but the man neither answers nor lessens the intensity of his attack. Shenoute eventually prevails and realizes this is not a man but a demon; and he realizes that he must expel the monks from the monastery.

But what exactly was this struggle about? Brakke’s response reflects his wish to honor the reality of the demonic in the life of the monk and his conviction that such encounters were complex, symbolic discourses. Thus, he offers the following observation: “This demon does not really tempt Shenoute: instead, from his encounter with the demon, Shenoute becomes aware that social position and personal feelings were clouding his judgment. The demon, by appearing as a figure of high social standing and power, in fact helps Shenoute reach a decision and follow what

he considers the right path . . . Shenoute's account to his followers of his experience with the demon must have served in part to legitimate his position as leader of the monastery" (4–5). This brief comment illuminates several important aspects of Brakke's approach to the demonic in this book. First, he is a skilled historian and always seeks to lay bare the particular historical setting and context of the encounter under question (avoiding the temptation to turn demonic temptation into a general, abstract phenomenon). Second, he is sensitive to the social context and meaning of these demonic encounters and seeks to locate the struggle against the demons within the social fabric of early monastic community and the larger world in which it moved. Third, he is interested in how monastic encounters with demons served to legitimate or undermine monastic authority, always inquiring into whose agenda was being served by a particular way of telling of a demonic encounter. Fourth, while he is concerned with understanding how these encounters affected the monks personally, how the work of discernment actually unfolded in the life of the monk; but he resists vigorously what he sees as a long-standing habit of explaining the demonic encounter largely (or solely) in terms of psychological categories.

There is yet a further, significant concern that guides his work and that is his insistent focus on the ethical dimension of the monastic encounter with the demons. "For the most part," he argues, "monastic demonologies concern themselves with roles that adversarial spirits play in the monk's ethical life, not with the uncanny forces that haunt perilous intersections or reside in threatening animals—the demons of local religion that interest most anthropologists and historians of religion . . . Christians endeavored to remain faithful to God and Christ in the face of evil spiritual and political forces that surrounded them, and this was primarily a moral task" (10). To struggle with the demons was a profound moral challenge, and one that could and often did deepen as one moved more deeply into monastic life.

These intersecting concerns reveal a commitment to avoid the kind of reductionism that has often distorted our understanding of the place of the demonic in monastic life, and for that matter of the spiritual life in general. Brakke's work offers an approach that takes seriously the reality of the demonic in the lives of the monks, but also engages every aspect of the literary-historical self-presentation of this reality with a sharp critical gaze. The result is a richly layered, sophisticated, and accessible account of how the early Christian monks understood themselves, the communities of which they were a part, and God in and through their encounter with the demons.

One question I was left with as I finished the book relates to just how careful we need to be about the application of psychological categories to interpret early monastic experience of the demonic. Brakke's recurring caution about the dangers of anachronistic readings of monastic experience strikes me as wise. But when one considers the depth and complexity of the struggle that is rendered across the entire landscape of early monastic literature, I wonder whether there is not also a danger of too much caution in this regard. The way that artists like Grünewald, Bosch, and Sassetta would later render the story of Antony struggling with the demons is instructive here. They drew most of what they knew of Antony and his experience from a much-compressed version of the *Life of Antony* found in *The Golden Legend*. And in their artistic representation of the story, they were highly selective, one might even say, subjective, in their interpretations. But what psychological acu-

ity, what empathy one feels in these paintings. One senses here, as one also senses in so much of the early monastic literature, the vulnerability the monks felt in the presence of the demonic, the sense of urgency and importance they attributed to this struggle, and the unnerving remaking of the self that this struggle portended and sometimes enacted in their lives. It seems important to bear this in mind, even as we learn to appreciate more fully, thanks to David Brakke's thoughtful and painstaking work, the socially constructed, endlessly varied, and often-contested character of this struggle among the early Christian monks.

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