son étude en trois parties : suivant une approche générique, il rappelle les modalités de la lettre (l'épître en vers latins, en vers français puis en prose) ; il montre les enjeux de l'épistolarité dans les *Regrets* de Du Bellay ; et il dégage de ce recueil la communauté littéraire et politique qui fut celle du poète angevin qui, au moyen du sonnet, entretient une correspondance assidue avec divers milieux.

Une substantielle bibliographie (p. 255–97) et un *Index rerum* complètent cet ouvrage très riche.

FRANÇOIS ROUGET, *Queen's University*


Most modern viewers of late medieval altarpiece representations of Calvary are appalled and horrified either by the bloody and painful images they present or by the guilty fascination they provoke. In either case, these works, particularly those from the German-speaking regions, seem to underline a barbarous and inhuman vision. They seem to place the “medieval” in opposition to much that we consider essential to civilised values and behavior. In this challenging book Merback firmly links the torments, particularly of the two thieves on either side of Christ, to both the penal practices and the penitential culture of the late Middle Ages. He shows convincingly that the twisted thieves, with their broken and bloodied limbs, were visually convincing representations of contemporary executions, many of which included horrific and painful violence to the body of the offender before he was exposed to the elements, often still alive, on an elevated wheel. In doing so, the author humanises his subject even as he recognises the discomfort it provokes in modern audiences.

Merback argues that the need for penance as well as penitence in order to earn or deserve salvation made devotional concentration on the pain and horror of physical atonement readily assimilable to penal practice. The “Good Thief,” especially, embodied in his pain an earthly penance that made his rapid ascent into heaven fully comprehensible and his atonement exemplary.

The implicit tension between good and bad thief echoes the images of virtue and temptation in *ars moriendi* books and is here sensitively related to a variety of religious, social and judicial contexts. Careful to avoid simplistic explanations, Merback suggests a number of ways of explaining the images he addresses and the changes they underwent over time. He may have overextended himself in linking the particularly bloody inverted images produced in the late fifteenth century in Bavaria and Austria to Mariolatry and anti-Jewish violence, but he nowhere implies simple or tidy explanations. His discussion of the decline of images of pain and suffering is likewise well-considered; the Reformation does not serve as a *deus ex machina.*
Merback gently but effectively disposes of claims that medieval spectacles were rooted in and sustained by pre-Christian myths and models of the cosmos; rather, he locates the tortures of the wheel firmly in late medieval culture and connects their images with the philopassionism so well discussed by Caroline Walker Bynum. Fuller discussion of the forces underlying, and consequences of, a faith so focused on physical pain and horror would have strengthened his presentation. He only hints at the role of an increasing focus on free will and personal accountability in prompting both efforts to provide those going to execution with a full opportunity to repent and a heightened interest in physical pain.

A few minor editorial errors do not diminish the book's worth. The University of Chicago Press should take great satisfaction in the fact that the images are remarkably clear and provide convincing support to the book's arguments. The heavy gauge paper and heft of the book make its price (U.S. $42) eminently reasonable, something one can seldom note today.

ALAN G. ARTHUR, Brock University