

Jacob Abell, *Spiritual and Material Boundaries in Old French Verse: Contemplating the Walls of the Earthly Paradise* (Medieval

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*Review*

This book begins in a moment of serendipity: while travelling and reading Marie de France's *Purgatory of St Patrick*, Jacob Abell noticed that its description of Eden's walls closely echoes the account in Benedeit's *Voyage of Saint Brendan the Abbot*. From that observation he develops a focused inquiry into how a single image – the exterior walls of the Earthly Paradise – operates across genres and centuries.

The Earthly Paradise stood at the center of medieval Christian geographies of the cosmos. As humanity's primal home, lost through the sin of Adam and Eve, it figured prominently in Old French narratives of lands beyond the ordinary world. Abell revisits this symbol in three poems: Marie de France's *Purgatory of St Patrick*, Benedeit's *Voyage of Saint Brendan the Abbot*, and Guillaume de Lorris's *Roman de la Rose*. Working across literary, cultural, and artistic evidence, he advances the thesis that the walls of Eden function as contemplative objects whose meanings shift with context, implicitly engaging ideas of economic solidarity and idealized community.

The imagery is Biblical. Lush visions of Eden draw on Genesis; the distant city with ornate walls and abundant riches recalls the Apocalypse of John and its New Jerusalem. Abell's readings track how these scriptural topoi are re-situated in vernacular poetry and in visual culture, where precious stones, measured

architecture, and radiant surfaces signal both eschatological promise and moral scrutiny. The 'wall', in his account, is not a boundary that excludes so much as a threshold that teaches: it arrests the eye, suspends desire, and invites evaluation of the social order.

In the *Voyage of Saint Brendan*, the walls mark a critique of material excess consonant with apocalyptic denunciations of wealth. The gems that crown Eden's circumference – Brendan's journey's end – are removed from circulation and offered purely for contemplation, set against the oppressive economies of Babylon. The episode intimates a community no longer organized by private property, anticipating the immateriality and shared goods of the afterlife.

Marie de France adapts the same lexicon differently. Inside the Earthly Paradise of the *Purgatory of St Patrick*, Owein and his companions encounter spectral clergy and Cistercian figures, and undergo an epiphany that foregrounds unity and caritas. Here the walls frame a pedagogy of spiritual communion animated by the Holy Spirit. Matter is not vilified so much as subordinated to the bonds that constitute an ecclesial commonwealth.

The contrast becomes sharper in Guillaume de Lorris's *Roman de la Rose*. Detached from explicit biblical scaffolding, the poem redeploys Edenic walls within an erotic and allegorical itinerary. The architecture still stages desire and contemplation, but it serves individual quest rather than communal or theological

ends. Abell's comparison shows how stable motifs migrate into new literary economies, where allegory reorganizes inherited forms and their moral resonance.

A strength of the study is its consistent attention to how "contemplative objects" mediate social imagination: by pausing movement and concentrating vision, the walls make visible competing logics of value – gift, use, ornament, and exchange. Read this way, Eden's perimeter becomes a site where aesthetics and ethics meet, and where vernacular poetry negotiates the claims of scarcity, abundance, and belonging.

Abell also widens the stakes. He argues that medieval visions of the Earthly Paradise, and of its walls in particular, can contribute to historically grounded reflection on contemporary issues, including the legacies of colonialism and the international refugee crisis. Without forcing equivalence, the book suggests that the imaginative geographies of paradise – edges, thresholds, guarded access, shared goods – illuminate how communities picture inclusion, exclusion, and care across borders.

As a whole, the study shows the value of revisiting familiar topoi from a new angle. The first two poems, *The Voyage of Saint Brendan* and *The Purgatory of St Patrick*, benefit especially from Abell's intertextual method and from his attention to apocalyptic economics and monastic ideals of community. In the case of the *Roman de la Rose*, the comparison inevitably loses some explanatory power because the biblical framework is more attenuated; yet its presence clarifies how resilient and adaptable these motifs are when translated into a different literary economy. The result is a

concise contribution to the study of Old French literature and to the cultural history of paradise, one that connects medieval contemplative images to questions of value, solidarity, and common life.

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