

Review of Meghan R. Henning, *Hell Hath No Fury: Gender, Disability, and the Invention of Damned Bodies in Early Christian Texts*

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What can visions of hell reveal about the concerns of people living in the ancient world? Meghan R. Henning seeks to answer this question in her first monograph. Noting that early Christian tours of hell were replete with physical torments codified by gender and specific moral transgressions, Henning analyzes the nature of bodies and punishment in late antique tours. In order to accomplish this task, Henning engages with a wide range of linguistic sources, including Greek, Latin, and Syriac apocalypses, as well as spatial, feminist, and disability theories to navigate the complex and occasionally contradictory visualizations of Christian damnation and its socio-cultural impact. The inclusion of these interpretative lenses works together to bolster her argument that "...the damned inhabit disabled, female, imprisoned bodies for all eternity" (19).

Beginning with an introduction to her various literary sources, Henning briefly outlines how ancient views of the female body and bodily suffering lend themselves to the framework of disability studies. As she notes, just as tours of hell dwell at the intersection of real and imagined spaces, so too, the eternally damned inhabit carceral bodies that manifest imaginary and real punishments. From her perspective, the tours of hell raise "...the ancient idea that bodily difference was a punishment for sin" (19) and such punishments were warranted for criminals in this life or the next.

The next three chapters of her book flow from this premise. Chapter 1, "Assigned to Suffering: Gendered Bodily Suffering in the Ancient World," traces how early Christian apocalypses connected the punitive spaces of the Roman world, such as mines, and reflects upon the nature of female bodies as especially suited to physical suffering. Similarly, Chapter 2, "Gendered Bodies, Social Identities, and the Susceptibility to Sin," examines the ways the punishments in hell were especially meted out based on violations of expected gender roles. Finally, Chapter 3, "Becoming Female and Deformed through Suffering in Hell"), details hell as a feminizing space. Together these chapters make a striking case for tours of hell as culturally attuned to the nuances of ancient gender roles and societal structures.

Chapter 4, "From Passive to Active: Gender and Atonement in Mary's Tours of Hell," reflects on Mary's roles as apocalyptic seer, intercessor for the damned, and "suffering mother" to Jesus, and more broadly, to members of the Christian church. The shift away from the damned allows Henning to explore how *descensus* literature employed the *topos* of maternal suffering through the figure of Mary. She finishes her analysis with a very brief conclusion and a short epilogue, both of which include reflections on the increasingly penalized and medicalized nature of the female body in the modern day.

Henning's work excels in her discussion of the socio-cultural condemnations coded in the damned's punishments. When she discusses the connection between women who abandon their children and the types of punishments that are inflicted upon them, she conjures the images of their bodies forced to breastfeed wild beasts in the Greek

Apocalypse of Ezra (52). In these discussions, Henning deftly details how condemnation of behaviors such as infant exposure and male adultery represents shifts from traditional Roman social mores to Christian ones (40). She quite rightly relays how the representation of hell changes as socio-cultural and religious expectations transform.

Even with her respect for these often-overlooked texts, readers may find themselves lost in the sheer volume of perspectives. In a work that brings together so many texts, it is inevitable that some aspects of her discussion require circumspection, and as such, readers familiar with the subject matter may feel adrift at some points. For example, during her discussion of homoeroticism (63–66) and later, pederasty and incest (66–68), readers may feel the weight of undiscussed scholarship. In both cases, there is a wide range of literature on ancient sexuality and aberrant sexual behaviors which do not appear in this discussion, such as David Halperin’s and Matti Nissinen’s works on homosexuality and Andrew Lear’s work on pederasty. Considering the sheer volume of texts she tackles, it is no wonder that Henning was forced to limit her scope here, but readers may still have questions about what is at stake in these depictions of sexual deviants in hell as well as in other moments where space to discuss the complexity of texts must yield to the need for brevity.

Perhaps one of the most intriguing aspects of Henning’s book is the implication of some her observations. In her words, “the bodies of the damned in hell look like the weak, female, sick, or deformed bodies of the real people who might hear or read the text” (86). What might it mean for a Roman male elite to imagine that they would spend an eternity in bodies that he abused or disregarded daily? I find such a question tantalizing, especially when Henning writes, “the forms of bodily punishment that were reserved for Roman nonelites and the enslaved... are used in the early Christian depictions of hell as a spectacle designed to spare the audience the shame of those punishments in the future” (42). Her statement assumes the perspective of those bearing social privileges, but what about those readers or listeners who would hear that the afterlife would be much of the same? Later, Henning writes that “the focus of salvation...is not so much on the damned, but on the living members of the tour’s audience who still have time to repent and change their behavior” (127). What might it mean to consider living in one’s own body as a fate worse than death, or, rather, a fate marked eternally by shame?

Readers familiar with Michel Foucault will appreciate Henning’s integration of heterotopias or “other places,” real spaces that enclose deviant and/or troubling aspects of society and culture, as a vehicle for understanding the highly systematic ordering of hell (84-85). She is right to acknowledge that tours of hell invite the gaze of those reading or listening to the text, and those gazes linger upon the broken, tormented bodies of the damned. Her point that “by bringing the damned near, hell’s heterotopia also offers a strategy of containment, a way to keep ‘sinners’ neatly cordoned off from the rest of the church” (85) is also an intriguing one. She raises the specter of the body politic and the place of the damned with relation to it. To be sure, Foucault seemingly rejected this totalizing discourse (Foucault, 1976, 97–98), but, as Daniel Punday has argued elsewhere Foucault’s use of body tropes frequently relies on an abstract use of the body politic and appropriates from the body politic tradition (Punday, 2000, 522–524). More importantly, ancient Christians embraced such notions and had inherited a sense of society as making a collective body from Greek and Roman political discourse and from their own sacred texts (Hicks 1963, 32–34). From this notion, Christians understood that excising those individuals that potentially corrupt the rest of the body was a proper course of action (See Jer. Comm. Matt. 1.29; PL 26.39; FOTC 117.81).

However, it appears that tours of hell assume to some degree that the damned remain somewhat a part of the Christian body politic. Henning reminds us that people can intercede for the damned, and the damned can give thanks to those who help them. Moreover, she clarifies that the damned as envisioned in these texts often receive reprieve, and at least one occasion they receive rest of the Lord's day (Mary's Repose 101), so that they participate in respite on the same days that the living and non-damned too rest. In these cases, I wonder how hell as a heterotopic space aids in the imagining and reifying of the concept of an integrated body of believers. Perhaps future works could take on these questions and explore these concepts as well.

In summary, this book takes a welcome plunge into the depths of hell as imagined in *descensus* literature. Henning makes a striking case for studying hell as an extension of the anxieties and concerns of the living. What's more, she opens the doors for future scholars to approach similar popular literature as worthy of erudite discussion. Certainly, her work has shone a light into the fears that haunted ancient Christians who sought to avoid the most damning of eternal fates. We all would do well to remember what Henning has so thoughtfully highlighted—ancient Christians held a visceral fear of being trapped in a less favorable body precisely because they witnessed the abuse of such bodies daily.

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