

Reviews



HELL HATH NO FURY: GENDER, DISABILITY, AND THE INVENTION OF DAMNED BODIES IN EARLY CHRISTIAN LITERATURE, by Meghan R. Henning. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2021. 288 pages. \$65.

This recent book by Meghan R. Henning explores the hellscapes of early Christian imagination as outlined in portions of several apocalypses of the first few centuries of the common era (examples include: *The Apocalypse of Peter*, *The Apocalypse of Paul*, *The Greek Apocalypse of Ezra*, the *Apocalypse of Zephaniah*, the *Book of Mary's Repose*, et al.) In each of these texts, a set of chapters provides a "tour of hell", in which a protagonist views the spectacle of damned bodies, and the punishments exacted upon them. Punishments follow a measure-for-measure logic, and the host asks the traveler about their experience as a viewer, as if to say, "and what did we learn?"

References to hell in the New Testament are relatively vague. Henning argues that these later texts elaborate on the scriptural depictions of hell, but the heart of her project is to examine the ways in which the imaginative landscape of hell in these texts employs real and imagined bodies and spaces. This sets damnation in the spaces of everyday life, recognizable but transformed just like the bodies that inhabit it, revealing a punitive imagination rooted in the writers' context, where divine justice looks like ancient Roman justice. Later in the book, Henning likens hell in these texts to a "eschatological zoo" (82), offering the viewer an opportunity to gawk at the spectacle of bodies in states of torment. Her analysis of these texts is rooted in gender criticism and disability studies, shifting the conversation from the theological/doctrinal to the discursive. For the purposes of this project, "hell is not the end of a life, but the beginning of thinking about torture and controlling the body" (2).

Chapter 1, "Assigned to Suffering: Gendered Bodily Suffering in the Ancient World," examines the social construction of bodies and the

notable assumption of many of the church fathers that the female body is assigned to suffering. Putting several early Christian writers (Clement, Origen, John Chrysostom) in conversation with thinkers such as Aristotle, Galen, Celsus and Hippocrates, Henning shows how the early church both resisted and participated in dominant cultural narratives. In deferring the end of gender differentiation to the eschaton, she argues that these writers were primarily repackaging, modifying, and reproducing existing gender ideologies. Consider, Henning urges, how, if the female body is assigned to suffering, “the ancient Christian woman is an excellent martyr not in spite of her gender, but because of it...” (47).

Chapter 2, “Gendered Bodies, Social Identities and the Susceptibility to Sin,” explores later tours of hell and how they reflect anxiety over the changing social roles of women. More serious sins are linked to a gendered hierarchy, and concerns for moral rectitude mapped onto the household order. For women, the hell-worthy trespasses shifted from sexual and marital sins (such as premature loss of virginity or adultery) to parental sins (such as abortion, though this was primarily presented as a way to conceal adultery). The blame for these sins landed only on female bodies, who were expected to demonstrate self-control in the domestic sphere.

Chapter 3, “Becoming Female and Deformed in Hell,” is the most theoretically robust. Here, Henning notes that most scholarly literature about damnation demonstrates a focus on the measure-for-measure rationale (the so-called *lex talionis*) for punishments in hell. This logic is certainly present, but in Henning’s view, these hellscapes are primarily a discursive project: they both reflect and construct reality. The normative body is narrowly conceived, leaving many bodies outside of that norm, bodies which are then punished for being non-normative. Drawing on Foucault’s notion of a *heterotopia*, an “other space” set apart from the social norm, Henning argues that hell is a space both mythic and real (83). In the later tours of hell, as norms shifted, and the Roman empire moved away from brutal and public forms of punishment, the imagined space of hell served a social purpose of juridical fantasy, education, spiritual reflection, and penance. Henning then outlines several punishments treated in the tours of hell—blindness, pathological weeping, fire, worms, extreme cold, and breast-milk beasts (yes, really!), and argues that each of these punishments has a gendered aspect. From the shame of passivity to penetration—these are bodies that no longer can hope for any mastery of self, meaning they are effectively feminized and/or dis-abled.

Finally, chapter 4, “From Passive to Active: Gender and Atonement in Mary’s Tours of Hell,” focuses on the Marian tours of hell (Mary’s

Dormition and Assumption, the Book of Mary's Repose, The Greek and Ethiopic Apocalypses of Mary), where she identifies a shift from a passive, suffering female body to the female body as soteriological agent. The tours of hell overlap with the *descensus* literature, where Christ or a saint descend to hell and witness, preach to, and make appeals for the condemned. The Marian tours, Henning argues, draw on both of these genres. As a result, Mary's *imitatio Christi* becomes more robust and redemptive. This hinges on a diachronic argument about the Marian traditions, but Henning makes a clear case that the early traditions around Christ's descent were in fact rather malleable, and that Mary—as a figure whose identity and role were manifold—was uniquely positioned to enjoy an expanded role in these traditions.

The book ends with a very brief conclusion, "Making Hell on Earth," and an epilogue, "Ancient Christian Hell's Afterlives." In the latter, Henning draws connections to contemporary society where non-normative bodies are made a spectacle for the purposes of education, catharsis, moralization, and reform. Connections are made to modern medical practice (an echo of chapter 1), the rhetoric around disabled bodies during the COVID-19 pandemic, and to the intersection of gender and ability as discussed in the 2020 documentary *Crip Camp*. The carceral system also features prominently, from the porous nature of the boundary between forced labor prisons and enslavement post-Civil War, to 19th century prison reform efforts which reflected a belief that women had "fallen further," to the 2010s Netflix series *Orange Is The New Black*. The show, which Henning argues serves as a modern-day tour of hell, is a para-feminist critique—critiquing the punitive spectacle "by first enfleshing it for the viewer," who watches from the safety of their own home—and through the gaze of a white woman (153). Nothing in the epilogue references the church or Christian writings/thought; the focus here is the wider contemporary cultural discourse in the U.S.

The book is relatively short at just over one hundred and fifty pages, but it is not a quick read. It is compellingly written, though quite dense at times. Still, there are places where I had hoped Henning would go deeper for the purposes of clarifying her argument. For example, Henning notes that these tours of hell find their origin in Jewish apocalypses and Greek and Roman texts describing a descent to Hades, but provides no citations, which would bring helpful connection and contrast. Likewise, more discussion of treatment of male (and/or normative) bodies in the tours of hell would have been welcome as a point of contrast. Overall (and I recognize this may have been the publisher's decision), I wanted more extensive

citations of texts in question. Of the two contemporary methodologies the author engages—gender criticism and disability studies—the former gets a far more robust treatment. The disabled body can feel like an afterthought in the book, but if ableism insists of a particular kind of body, with anything else being undesirable, disability becomes a helpful category for thinking about bodies in hell that are marked as “deviant” (17). It is a valuable addition to her study, and I wanted more on the topic.

While the topic of the book is ultimately relatively narrow, Henning impressively demonstrates what this small set of texts bring to broader conversations about divine justice, gender, and embodiment. On the whole, Henning’s study is an illuminating one that encourages careful consideration about complex questions: how and why has the church participated in the cycle of identifying, stigmatizing, and punishing non-normative bodies? How do these imagined hellscape inform our sense of divine justice, juridical and carceral systems? How has the church both resisted and reinforced ideologies of embodiment, gender, and normativity? To what extent is our imagination of divine punishment informed by a highly contextual sense of judgment and justice—and if so, what calls out for change? Many in liberal mainline Protestant traditions may not give much thought to hell, but our religious ancestors did, and Henning’s book pushes us to consider how “the sediment of hell’s logic is much nearer [than we think], present in the ways we conceive of social responsibilities, justice, and bodies” (151). In this reader’s estimation, Henning’s book is not necessarily one with a broad audience, but those with an established interest in early Christian writings, hell and condemnation, and matters of embodiment and enculturation will find it enriching.

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