

Book Reviews

Margaret Mitchell, *Paul, The Corinthians and the Birth of Christian Hermeneutics* (Cambridge University Press, 2010); xiv+178 pp. ISBN: 9780521197953. £50.

In ancient rhetorical theory, *decorum* describes the ability of a rhetor to render an idea in a manner fitting to the topic under dispute. As Quintilian and Cicero tell us, the eloquent speaker will be able to adapt his or her speech to the given subject matter, the circumstances of the speech itself, the audience, and so forth. As M. argues in her book, this concept was employed by Christian authors in their attempts to use the scriptures to comment on issues in their own time. Using tools acquired through their education in rhetoric, biblical commentators sought to demonstrate that apparently brief texts hid a wealth of profound meanings. It is somewhat appropriate (or decorous), then, that M.'s own book, although brief, presents a number of theses that will have a significant impact on the way we understand the nature of early Christian hermeneutics. In M.'s work, as in early Christian exegesis, brevity disguises import.

This book contains the text of M.'s Speaker's Lectures in Biblical Studies, given at Oxford in 2008. The central contention is that during the correspondence (partially) preserved in 1 and 2 Corinthians, Paul re-evaluated the importance of hermeneutic confusion in his missionary work. Drawing extensively on Kathy Eden's *Hermeneutics and the Rhetorical Tradition* (1997), M. points out that ancient training in rhetoric cultivated an appreciation of the pliability of meaning in supposedly fixed and authoritative texts. Forensic arguments focussed around opposing interpretations of texts and ancient rhetors were coached in the commonplaces required to justify their interpretation over their opponents'. Demonstrating that it is exactly these commonplaces that Paul draws on to justify his own readings of the Old Testament, M. argues that Paul is self-consciously and wilfully reinterpreting his own writing and what would become the Old Testament.

Although the correspondence with the Corinthians began as an attempt to resolve confusion, Paul realised that the hermeneutic process itself was key to understanding the ethical and epistemological shift that belief in Christ brought. The Corinthian correspondence shows us that Paul tries to present the Christian community as a group united by a common conception of what and how things (words; bodies; the cross) mean. A vocation in Christ demands a new way of thinking about and understanding the world. While this distinction allows Paul to differentiate clearly between those inside and those outside the Church, it cannot describe why there are disagreements within the Church itself. In addressing this crisis in Paul's hermeneutics, M. traces the way that he adapts the biblical trope of clarity / obscurity and melds it with the rhetorical commonplaces used to make meaning in texts. She points out that seeing and not seeing is a dialectic (or, a 'veil scale'), that allows Paul to claim either to suit his ends.

Furthermore, M. demonstrates that the paradigms of interpretation through which Paul moves in the Corinthian correspondence have had a fundamental role in shaping Christian exegesis. Looking less at specific citations of 1 and 2 Corinthians than at moments when Patristic authors seek to justify their own hermeneutic strategies, M. argues that Paul's justifications of his reading of both the OT and the human body gave Christian writers the tools necessary to build their own interpretations of the Bible, to comment 'with the text,' rather than simply 'on the text'. At the heart of Paul's hermeneutic method, as M. argues, is a pragmatic willingness to change the meaning of texts according to the given situation.

He bequeathed to subsequent generations of exegetes a set of maxims and exemplars that they subsequently refined, developed and manipulated to meet their own ends.

Kathy Eden's discussion of hermeneutic theory in rhetorical education structures key theoretical approaches in the work, but M. also particularly acknowledges the influence of Frances Young, Elizabeth Clark and Averil Cameron. These influences can be detected in M's insistence that the Corinthian correspondence was born of a crisis of meaning and reference in Paul's letters and his body. For M., early Christianity is shaped by fundamental debates over how things mean; not merely what the death and resurrection of Christ says about humanity, but also how it changes the meaning of words and bodies. The Corinthian correspondence shows us the significance of dispute and mediation in the formation of Christianity, that even Paul offered alternate readings of his own words. M. closes her book by suggesting that future discussions of Christian exegesis might focus on the way that early Christians methodically exploit the tension between clarity and obscurity in their discussions of meaning. Meaning is always negotiated, hermeneutic stability is always deferred. Like the early Christians themselves, scholarship of early Christianity walks the line between clarity and obscurity, the already and the not-yet.

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Virginia Burrus, Mark D. Jordan, Karmen Mackendrick, *Seducing Augustine: Bodies, Desires, Confessions* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2010); xi + 174 pp.

Seducing Augustine. Bodies, Desires, Confessions is a co-production by three eminent authors, each of whom has recently written at least one book on related topics, Mark Jordan (*The Ethics of Sex*, 2002), Virginia Burrus (*The Sex Lives of Saints*, 2004) and Karmen Mackendrick (*Word Made Skin*, 2004). Based on a lecture series held in 2006 at the University of California's Center for the Study of Sexual Culture, the volume is genuinely meant to be co-authored, yet not in the sense that all authors were equally contributing to the whole of the manuscript, but each author is a "primary drafter" of one or more chapters and certain "writerly particularities" and "even idiosyncracies" are retained (p. x). The volume deals with the erotic qualities of some of Augustine's writings, in particular certain parts of the *Confessions*, *On Christian Teaching* and the *City of God*. The book falls into four chapters, 1. *Secrets and Lies*, 2. *The Word. His Body*, 3. *Freedom in Submission*, 4. *No Time for Sex*, and is framed by an introduction entitled *Pleasurable Temptations* and a conclusion entitled *Seductive Praises*.

Introduction and conclusion, and to some extent also Chapter 1, discuss some recent scholarship, especially the work of Margaret Miles (*Desire and Delight*, 1992), and critique the traditional reading of the relevant parts of Augustine's work that "we are confronted" in Augustine's work "with what may seem an excess of both desire and renunciation" (p. 2). Rather than denounce or excuse Augustine this volume aims to "divert and pervert" him (p. 7) in the sense of describing his seductive strategies. The aim is not to "attempt to expose Augustine's sexual history" but to "explore how the *Confessions* conjoins the erotic with the secret, the imaginary, and the fictional" thus "rendering Augustine's actual sex life not only inherently unknowable but also very nearly irrelevant" (p. 8). Augustine, we are told in Chapter 1 (whose primary drafter is Virginia Burrus), may very well be "faking the whole thing" (p. 13). And he cannot help it: For assuming that the whole of

humanity is inescapably caught up in original sinfulness he feels unable to tell the full and un-hidden truth about his life, though he denies that this is equivalent to being forced to lie (*Against Lying* 2.3: “It is not the same thing to hide truth as to offer a lie”). The unveiling of his secrets is a process. One veil after the other is lifted, and herein lies the seductiveness of his writing. His strategy is one of “displacement (*se-ducere*, to take aside, to divert from one’s path)” (p. 15). We never get the full story. Just when we think we have come to the point, we are frustrated. The sexual connotation of this experience is intentional. Seduction is the counterpoint to orgasm, and for Augustine the latter is always a negative, bitter, empty, experience, the essence of sin. The story of the pear theft in *Confessions* 2.9 is eponymous in this respect. It recalls, of course, the story of the Fall in Genesis 3. We are never told how the fruit tasted to Adam and Eve, and Augustine threw away the stolen pears. The experience of transgressing God’s law was not a physical one. The illicit taste of freedom was a spiritual experience. For a moment the transgressors felt like God. Therein lay the real sin. It was not a moment of triumph but of devastation. And although the transgression was committed as a social act (together with others), it separated the transgressors from each other as well as from God. There was no love in this kind of friendship (p. 18). “We were seduced and we seduced, we were deceived and we deceived” (*Confessions* 4.1). Burrus also draws attention to the fact that there seems to be no place for a female other in this narrative. The only possible candidate, Augustine’s companion for many years, remains a nameless “one” (*una*). Once she is torn from his side like “Adam’s spare rib” (a pun recently elaborated upon by Danuta Shanzer in the *Journal of Roman Studies*, 92, 2002, pp. 157-76; see p. 21), he puts up with allegorical figures, Continence, Chastity, Wisdom, and Scripture.

At this stage in the narrative of the *Confessions* suddenly Augustine’s relationships with male friends come into focus, above all his friendship with his “boyfriend” (p. 25) from childhood days, turned into unspeakable grief through a premature death. This story has turned out to be a potential playground for a certain type of modern scholarship, as Burrus observes, yet we do not learn much about underage same-sex practices from Augustine’s text here, nor about their definite absence for that matter. What we do get from Augustine is a lesson in friendship, a lesson which Augustine himself seems not to have learnt from his relationship with his female partner, but which he learnt from the loss of his friend and was then able to transfer to his later thoughts on heterosexual marriage. For Augustine, thus Burrus, “true friendship is truly promiscuous, accepting mortal mutability, difference, and multiplicity as the conditions of erotic self-transcendence in the infinite unfolding of a divine love” (p. 28). Having his boyfriend torn from him taught him that divine love (*caritas*) is not to cleave to mortal bodies. But is not the friendship-bond of marriage based on this very physical fact (*On the Good of Marriage* 1.1)? There is clearly a contradiction here, as Burrus points out (p. 29). But Augustine, she concludes, uses this fact to “push” male friendship “off the map of theological articulation, rendered virtually unnamable” (p. 30). Although itself obviously not an answer to the question thrown up by the limits of human friendship, cruelly exposed by death, heterosexual marriage nevertheless serves Augustine to distract from a range of other questions raised by his intriguing depiction of male-male relationships.

Chapter 2, drafted by Mark Jordan, provides reflections on the bodily, seductive and erotic qualities of language (both the written and the spoken word). In addition to the *Confessions* Jordan also refers to *On Christian Teaching*, Augustine’s “handbook for the Christian rhetorician”, parts of which he wrote almost contemporaneously to *Confessions*. In many respects this chapter is more abstract than Chapter 1. It aims to analyse the exact methods with which Augustine produces his “seductive” prose. To begin with, the very

structure, “the sequence of attraction and redirection” (p. 37) of rhetorical-narrative prose, the way in which one sign points to another, and so on, is seductive. However, thus Jordan, the rhetor is under a moral obligation to provide a (“true”) meaning and thus to complete the motion initiated by the sign. Not to do so would amount to moral failure. To distil erotic language, as it occurs in the Bible, e. g. most poignantly in the Song of Songs, but also in other places, to such “true”, moral and intellectual meaning, was the task of the early Christian exegete. Thus Christ was not to be depicted like an Olympian god in heaven (p. 41), fertility-terminology (e. g. semen, milk, amniotic fluid) was to be diverted. “The body of Jesus,” thus Jordan, “mistrusted as figure, is supplanted by the ‘body’ of the church, construed as better-than-figure, as continuously disciplined letter. The masturbatory pleasures of feigned figure, the demonic copulations of covenants for overinterpretation, are mortified by an authoritative community” (p. 44). Addressed to outsiders and dealing with the use of language addressed to outsiders the *Confessions* and *On Christian Teaching* remain silent about Christian rituals. But this silence about liturgical mysteries, thus Jordan, as much as the silence about “scandalous copulations” (p. 61), is like “skin between the borders of words. Some of the skin is Augustine’s. Some belongs to Jesus” (ibid.).

Chapter 3, drafted by Karmen Mackendrick, is about freedom and the will. Augustine, thus Mackendrick, describes the will as both active and passive. Not willing is not an option. It amounts to willing nothing (p. 68). For Augustine, who asks God positively to command him, even submission is an activity of the will. But there is a problem. “‘I myself,’ Augustine declares, ‘cannot grasp the totality of what I am’ (*Confessions* 10.15). But how can I know then, whether the commandments to which I submit are the right ones? I cannot, Mackendrick answers (p. 75). However, there is a lesson to be learned here, and it has to do with our main theme, seduction. Submission has to come with resistance. Indeed, doubts are in place if submission comes with too little resistance. Mackendrick here cites the example of Augustine’s friend Alypius, whom Augustine criticized because he was too ready to submit himself. Contenance came to him too easily, almost naturally (p. 76). For Augustine’s taste his submission was too passive (p. 77). Mackendrick here describes the prospect of a life without temptation as a life that had already died an entropic death. For Augustine, the temptation to be untempted must be resisted in this life (p. 78). The risk of yielding to temptation, the “danger” in this life, is not the same as the evil of actually having yielded to it. Thus, Mackendrick concludes, “the asceticism of the will that intensifies into obedience is also eros, another way of seeking to disrupt the boundaries of the self and to be drawn forth in an infinite seduction” (p. 81). On the level of the flesh this infinity remains a bad infinity, “our bodies ... trying to reach divinity beyond their own limitations” (p. 84). But in the cross-section between our bodies and eternity, in our intellects and in our wills, where we struggle with resistance and practise obedience, we may touch, albeit “glancingly ... on divinity after all” (ibid.).

Chapter 4, drafted again by Virginia Burrus, explores further this cross-section, “the present”, in which “there is no time for sex” (p. 86). For Augustine, it is the task of the memory, “the belly of the mind”, to allow this presence into the body, draw it in so to speak, make it ever-present, as far as possible (p. 93). The past, the future, even the material world, the ground on which I stand (*terra*), are nothing (*nihil*) compared to that eternal presence (p. 95f.), that “joy”, that “all-at-once”, that *mira profunditas*, that *tremor amoris* etc. (p. 98). But to be sure, this “heavenly love” does not exclude our bodies. Augustine, after all, believes in the resurrection of the body. This is why he has to address the question of “sex in the City of God”. Can there be “sex for the eternal joy of it” (p. 99)? Augustine approaches this question indirectly, through his discussion of sex in

Paradise. Before the Fall, thus Augustine, Adam and Eve felt no shame about their sexual organs; and he discusses in great detail how they practised sex without shame or lust (pp. 100-104). In heaven it will be even better. For there, “the genitals are not to be used, but are simply to be looked at and admired for their beauty, beauty that will cause the beholder to praise God” (p. 107). Scopophilia is the kind of sexual activity that goes on in heaven, Burrus quotes Margaret Miles (p. 108), but not as a preliminary to physical sex or as a perversion, but as a realisation of the actual constitution of the heavenly body, in which body and mind, intellect and will, are one. Our vision will be wholly vision, and it will see at once God and the other. It is in each others’ incarnate selves that the saints will see God (p. 109). In the relevant passages in the *City of God* (book 22) Augustine, unlike, for example, Porphyry, does not contrast physical and intellectual vision (p. 110). Rather, the two are transcended by the one kind of vision that occurs in heaven. Even the word “vision” serves only as an analogy for the kind of activity that actually goes on in heaven. But then, why not, Burrus asks, make use of other analogies as well and “attribute to resurrected bodies the pleasures of mutual touching, tasting, smelling, and hearing, as well as gazing” (p. 111)? Of course, the focus in Augustine’s vision of heaven is on eternity, into which all analogies collapse. But “sexual pleasure”, thus Burrus in a final observation, “the thing most glaringly absent from Paradise as Augustine imagines it, may be as close as most of us come to eternity in time” (p. 113). Therefore, she concludes, tongue in cheek, “what are we waiting for?”

There is a serious point here, which is taken up again in the conclusion. For ancient thinkers, and in this Augustine differs less from Porphyry than from Descartes, the bodily senses are not separated from the intellect. This is why, in reply to Burrus’ earlier question, there is a hierarchy among the senses. Vision is not equivalent to smelling or tasting but essentially similar to the intellect. But most importantly, if we speak (in view of, in an analogous sense, “experiencing” the intellect) of “spiritual senses”, a notion originally developed by Origen, but also present in other Platonists, we must “refrain from modern distinctions and allow the spirit its full embodiment: these are not senses distinct from the flesh, but the senses of the body transfigured beyond ending” (p. 126). Spiritual seduction is therefore not just a weak metaphor, but a robust antidote against worldly temptation. Paradoxically, it is by its very being seduction that spiritual seduction builds up an effective resistance against (“worldly”) seduction. The ultimate joy, however, which this spiritual seduction promises is not the empty hope or the materialistic aestheticism of a sexually frustrated ascetic, but an all-embracing powerful reality experienced by those who have lived life to the full (in Augustine’s sense that is; though the question who these are supposed to be opens a whole new can of worms).

To sum up, this book is extremely well written and subtly argued. It contains a wealth of source references backed up by secondary references in the endnotes. It is thus an excellent guide for anyone who wants to study Augustine’s own works on the subject directly, in particular the *Confessions* and the relevant parts of the *City of God*; and it is a real revelation regarding Augustine’s role in the (intellectual) history of human sexuality.

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