

BOOK REVIEWS AND NOTES

***Reading Bodies: Physiognomy as a Strategy of Persuasion in Early Christian Discourse.* By Callie Callon. Library of New Testament Studies 597. London: T&T Clark, 2019. vii + 173 pp. \$108. hardcover; \$35.95 paperback.**

Physiognomy—the ancient science of interpreting the body, its appearance and comportment, to discern character—was used by early Christian writers to bolster in-groups, lambast adversaries, and advance exceptional visions of Christian morality, argues Callie Callon in *Reading Bodies*. A revision of her 2015 University of Toronto doctoral dissertation, Callon’s study complements work on the body and gender in ancient Christian sources that has proliferated in the decades following Peter Brown’s landmark study *The Body and Society: Men, Women, and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity* (Columbia University Press, 1988). Like those studies, *Reading Bodies* reminds us that while early Christians may have extolled the soul and spirit, they remained ever sensitive to the potent semiotics of the body, especially as a rhetorical tool.

Reading Bodies examines how “physiognomic consciousness” surfaces as a persuasive tactic in early Christian sources dating from the first to the fourth centuries CE (15). This concept is borrowed from the earlier work of Elizabeth C. Evans (“Physiognomics in the Ancient World,” *Transactions of the American Philosophical Society* 59, no. 5 [1969]: 1–101). “Physiognomic consciousness,” Callon explains in her initial chapter, “is an application of the principles of physiognomy, paired with a commonplace or shared understanding of what a given gesture, mannerism, physical aspect or animal comparison convey regarding a person’s character, but it is not restricted by the mandates or even the definitions found in the manuals” (19). This framing allows Callon to showcase the flexibility in early Christian deployments of physiognomic thinking; like their non-Christian predecessors and contemporaries, they drew eclectically from the zoological, ethnographic, and anatomical modes, and they could be inconsistent in the meanings they ascribed to physiological features (12–14, 28).

Subsequent chapters of *Reading Bodies* consider how physiognomic thinking informs a particular ancient Christian discourse: heresy/orthodoxy, Christian identity and self-fashioning, martyrdom, and representations of Jesus’s appearance, respectively. Callon’s analysis is not exhaustive (certain modes of physiognomic thinking, such as the astrological, do not feature [34]); instead, it provides a thematic survey that emphasizes how physiognomy could serve persuasive aims. For ancient heresiologists, physiognomy provided a means to produce and undermine opponents. Effeminizing one’s target by emphasizing his unmanly and weak-toned voice, fast and meandering walk, ornamented and coiffed look, or corpulence were common strategies. Unmanly and undisciplined bodies, so the logic held, signified unruly minds and suspect character. Early Christians utilized physiognomy in their articulations of in-group identity too.

Particular attention was directed to female ascetics' performance of modesty, we learn in chapter 3. Building on Kristi Upson-Saia's *Early Christian Dress: Gender, Virtue, and Authority* (Routledge, 2011) and other studies which consider how Christians used dress to consolidate their superior morality, Callon draws our attention to early Christians' commentary on gait, voice, hair, affect (laughter), and facial expressions as efforts to improve social position. Both chapters point to the agonistic nature of physiognomic thought, its connection to the androcentric world of rhetorical contest so aptly described by Maud Gleason in *Making Men Sophists and Self-Presentation in Ancient Rome* (Princeton University Press, 1995).

Interesting would have been more sustained discussion of the agonistic context of the early Christian male rhetoric under examination here and, with it, deeper consideration of the specific milieux in which the authors and sources Callon analyses operated. This discussion may have undercut some of the stability that the term "Christian" occupies in this study too.

Chapter 4 supplements the extensive work on the representation of the martyrs' bodies and gender in martyrological accounts (116). Callon elaborates how physiognomic reasoning secured images of these figures as exemplary models of piety. Early Christian writers could, however, depart from cultural conventions of beauty and rhetoric when it came to Jesus's uncomely earthly appearance as prophesied in the suffering servant songs of Isaiah. In chapter 5, Callon demonstrates that rationales for emphasizing Jesus's lackluster form were multiple, often stressing the veracity of his human flesh and his crucifixion. This move may have additionally, she speculates, distinguished Jesus from other divine figures known for their sublime beauty, like Hadrian's deified boy-lover, Antinous.

Overall, *Reading Bodies* reflects the continued interest within the field of early Christian studies in identity construction, gender performance, and discursive practice—analytics that have undergone recent critique, however: for example, Maia Kotrosits, *Rethinking Early Christian Identity: Affect, Violence, and Belonging* [Fortress Press, 2015]; and Cavan W. Concannon, *Assembling Early Christianity: Trade, Networks, and the Letters of Dionysius of Corinth* [Cambridge University Press, 2017]). At points, Callon leans heavily on a synthetic review of earlier work, supplementing and supporting it, rather than offering more novel analyses and conclusions. A survey approach also blunts some opportunities to read early Christian authors in greater depth with their contemporaries (whether Christian or not), with whom they were in conversation and competition. Yet, throughout, Callon addresses surprising and engaging details missed by other scholars of early Christian sources, which makes her study satisfying. (A favorite of this reader was her argument that Jerome's disparagement of Pelagius played on negative associations of wrestlers' corpulence and concomitant dull intellect [61–66]). Ultimately, Callon convinces that "physiognomic consciousness" pervaded early Christian rhetorical expression, serving a myriad of purposes, and for many centuries.

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