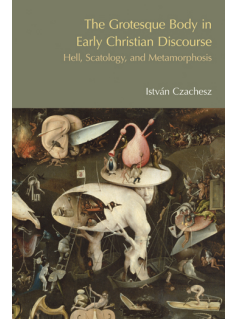


*The Grotesque Body in Early Christian Discourse: Hell, Scatology, and Metamorphosis*, by István Czachesz

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The grotesque has already featured in a number of studies of the canonical biblical literature. In this book, István Czachesz employs the Russian literary critic Mikhail Bakhtin's subject of "the grotesque" to analyse a variety of non-canonical early Christian texts. He integrates the subjects of hell, scatology, and metamorphosis into a unified discussion of what he labels the grotesque body. Drawing on Bakhtin, he defines the grotesque as combining two elements, namely, a humorous and attention-grabbing component with a confusing, repulsive, and fearful component. In short, the grotesque can be described as "laughing at pain."

Within Part I, Czachesz takes his reader on a journey through hell as found within second-century texts the *Apocalypse of Peter* and the *Apocalypse of Paul*. The fearful and humorous are interwoven in the imagery of hell, and early Christian literature features a constant supply of grotesque elements, for instance, people sitting in filth (such as a "river of diarrhoea"), images of castration and childbirth, and tormented body parts. The *Apocalypse of Peter*, for example, associates hell with a huge belly which swallows and digests people. There is also a belief that certain crimes are committed by certain parts of the body which are, in turn, punished accordingly. For example, within the *Apocalypse of Peter*, blasphemy is connected with the mouth and adultery is associated with women's hair and men's genitals. This suggests a somewhat different construction of the body and its limits than as found in the Torah. In a subsequent chapter, Czachesz compares the *Apocalypse of Peter* to the Egyptian *Book of the Dead* to further probe the connection between visions of morality and the structuring of hell, tightening the observation that overall images of hell and particular punishments are fitted according to the bodily location of sinful activity (cf. Mk 9:43). In terms of theoretical deployments in this section of the book, Czachesz never gets much further than introducing Bakhtin's concept of the grotesque and then identifying its bodily appearance through the ancient literature surveyed.

In the final chapter of Part I, however, Czachesz shifts to the *Acts of Thomas* and the topic of demonology. Demonic figures are believed to penetrate the minds of individuals' bodies. The *Acts of Thomas*, for instance, employs grotesque imagery to describe such invasions and the processes of the human psyche. Czachesz identifies a narrative pattern occurring three times in the text in which a demon loves a woman and tortures her until a man of God drives him out. He finds parallels of this pattern in other ancient literature, for instance within the Book of Tobit. Recognizing the occurrence of demon possession as a typology, he creatively re-reads the episodes from the *Acts of Thomas* with the help of Carl Jung's psychological perspectives of the mind. The pattern of the "bride of the demon" is described as a narrative of the dominance of the destructive powers of the unconscious over the creative forces represented by the female figure. Czachesz does a good job of drawing out how these narratives can signify the sexual and moral aspects of basic psychological complexes.

Part II of the monograph, "Scatology," begins with a chapter on deviance labelling and the politics of the grotesque. Czachesz draws on social scientific approaches as they have been developed in biblical studies, in particular the challenge-response exchange which functions as a central feature of honour acquisition within a limited-good society, and also the theory of deviance labelling in which deviancy is produced through social processes involving conflict between dominant and weaker groups. Czachesz singles out Bruce J. Malina and Jerome H. Neyrey's application of deviance labelling to the book of Acts (yet curiously absent from his bibliography is their more extensive engagement with the Gospel of Matthew, *Calling Jesus Names: The Social Value of Labels in Matthew* [Polebridge Press, 1988]). He applies their emphasis on *status degradation* to certain characters from the canonical gospels, Acts, and the *Acts of Peter*. Czachesz moves quickly over deviance labelling within the gospels and Acts. Of particular note is his reading of Peter's adversaries in the *Acts of Peter*; firstly, between Peter and Simon, and then also between Peter and Agrippa. In both cases, Simon and Agrippa respectively attempt to label Peter as deviant; however, their process is not successful in either case. In fact, within this text, in contrast to the earlier canonical gospels, followers of Christ cannot be labelled as deviants; rather they remain honourable citizens of the Roman Empire.

The next chapter analyses scatological humour in the *Acts of Peter* and the *Acts of Andrew*, with passing reference to scatology in the Old Testament and through Greek and Roman literature. Czachesz focuses on the role of

metabolism as a tool of grotesque humour in the service of ridiculing enemies. For example, in the *Acts of Peter*, after Marcellus is misled by Simon, he has his servants beat him before emptying chamber pots onto his head. Czachesz argues that these pots were not simply litter bins, but pots “full of filth” and containing human excrement. In a brief survey of scatology in the Old Testament he notes that within the Pentateuch metabolic products are not in themselves unclean; purity laws concerning bodily matter are found in Leviticus 15 and include flow or discharge, male semen, and menstruation, although there is no mention of faecal excrement. Within narrative and prophetic texts, however, scatological language typically symbolizes death and destruction. This section could have been enhanced by engagement with a 2004 article on the topic by Gershon Hepner who argues that the biblical authors often obfuscated their language when referring to scatological objects (“Scatology in the Bible,” *Scandinavian Journal of the Old Testament* 18, no. 2 (2004): 278–95).

Part III of the monograph deals with the subject of metamorphosis, beginning with “Polymorphy” in chapter 7. Polymorphic appearances (to appear in different forms simultaneously) of Jesus occur across a variety of early Christian writings. Jesus’s polymorphy, according to Czachesz, involves an element of the grotesque, although this link is tenuous and remains somewhat underdeveloped in his exploration. Czachesz observes instances of polymorphy in the *Acts of John*, the *Acts of Peter*, the *Acts of Andrew*, and the *Acts of Thomas*, before considering parallels in polymorphic appearances within early Christian literature and other Greco-Roman sources. He argues that the widespread religious idea in Greek culture that divine beings have no fixed appearance and are capable of manifesting themselves in several forms, possibly lies behind the occurrences of polymorphy in early Christianity.

The next chapter shifts to animal bodies which speak; a surprisingly rare occurrence within the canonical texts when compared to the apocryphal *Acts* and rabbinical literature. Czachesz focuses on speaking asses in the *Acts of Thomas*, making comparisons with Jesus’s entry into Jerusalem in the Gospels of Mark and Matthew, before briefly considering some of the psychological aspects of speaking animals. Psychological considerations return in the next chapter, “Metamorphoses of Christ,” in which cognitive science is employed to illuminate why supernatural abilities associated with dead people occurred frequently in the ancient world. Czachesz explores depictions of Christ in animal form, such as when he appears as an eagle in the *Apocryphon of John*, written into the creation account as one teaching Adam and his “fellow essence”

about their fallen state. Christ as an eagle also appears in the *Acts of Philip* and the *Acts of Thomas*. Czachesz suggests that the appearance of Christ in the form of an eagle has its antecedents in Homer and the frequent use of bird metamorphosis in Greek literature. Chapter 10 elaborates considerably on the cognitive perspectives mentioned previously. Czachesz proposes that the attention-grabbing and humorous components of grotesque elements are closely associated with ontological categories which have been attested cross-culturally. However, archaic emotions of fear and disgust are also driven by the confusing and repulsive aspects of grotesque imagery.

The epilogue rounds off Czachesz's study of the grotesque in early Christian literature by outlining some useful historical considerations: first, in continuity with Bakhtin's emphasis on the "all-popular" nature of grotesque images, early Christian sources also have connections with sub-elite and popular cultures; secondly, the geographical expansion of early Christianity led to a mix of social diversity which no doubt gave rise to aggressive rhetoric and malignant gossip; thirdly, metamorphosis, a widespread idea in ancient religious discourse, became a central theme in the development of early Christian thought. Czachesz is careful to emphasize that his study is more concerned with *how* the early Christians used the grotesque rather than *where* they borrowed certain ideas from. He also admits repeatedly that his study is not especially concerned with the social features and structures of early Christianity that gave rise to the grotesque, although I feel that if such considerations had been developed it would have certainly strengthened the study—especially in terms of what a reader might take away from the book.

As someone who is generally satiated with the grotesque elements one finds in abundance within the canonical biblical literature itself, I must admit that venturing forth into extra-canonical territory was both exciting and illuminating. Through Czachesz's presentation, I encountered foreign textual bodies previously unexplored. This is a definite strength of the monograph as it enables the construction of a well-rounded understanding of the body within the period of the earliest Christian centuries. The flip side to this, however, is that the book attempts to cover a lot of ground, and this lack of focus means that the analysis of some texts is somewhat fleeting. Moreover, the study would have benefited from a more sustained and robust engagement with Bakhtin's thought right throughout the book (for example, more elaboration on the ways in which the literary trope functions as a means of social critique from a marginal identity within the wider Roman Empire in Part I). Similarly, the excursions into cognitive science prior to chapter 10 were very

brief, and would have profited from a lengthier explanation, perhaps in the book's Introduction, as to their relevance for understanding the grotesque.

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