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The Harrowing of Hell in Medieval England (review)

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participates in the best traditions of scholarly discourse: collaborative, inquisitive, untiring, and refreshingly undoctinaire.

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KARL TAMBURR. *The Harrowing of Hell in Medieval England*. Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2007. Pp. xii, 211. £50.00; \$85.00.

The harrowing of hell is distinctive to the Middle Ages and in some ways helps to define medieval culture. Although medieval commentators were able to find only the most oblique references to it in the New Testament, its centrality to the life of Christ was seldom in dispute. In the *Legenda Aurea*, Jacobus de Voragine neatly sums up the medieval attitude to the harrowing in his chapter on the resurrection: “Concerning the seventh and last issue that needs to be considered here, namely how Christ led out the holy fathers who were in limbo and what he did there, the gospel has declared nothing openly. Nevertheless, Augustine in a certain one of his sermons and Nicodemus in his own gospel have revealed something of this.”

The authorities are the pseudo-Augustine *Sermo 160 De Pascha* (PL 39:2059–61) and the *Gospel of Nicodemus*, which contains what in the Middle Ages was regarded as authentic testimony of the harrowing. Postmedieval theology, both Protestant and Catholic, based itself more strictly on the scriptural canon and so denied the authority of the apocryphal gospel. This characteristically medieval idea of the harrowing of hell has been explored a number of times in articles and within monographs and critical editions concerned with larger subjects. Karl Tamburr’s book, however, is the first attempt to deal with the subject in its own right as it appeared in the culture of medieval England. The focus is mainly on textual traditions, including the liturgy, but there is as well a rich body of visual representations of the subject, and he uses this material here to provide points of reference in different periods and contexts.

This book has strengths and weaknesses. The strengths are its range of reference and the author’s willingness to investigate a variety of texts and visual representations. It draws on material from the early Christian

period to the sixteenth century. Weaknesses emerge mainly in connection with specific issues, although there are flaws as well in the way Tamburr understands some of the functions of the harrowing of hell in medieval popular religion, or what has come to be known as vernacular theology. Tamburr describes the book as “a series of interrelated essays.” This, he readily acknowledges, means that the study is not comprehensive; nevertheless, it would have been helpful for him to have made explicit the criteria for inclusion and exclusion of material. For example, why is there no mention of fifteenth-century Middle English prose translations of the *Gospel of Nicodemus* and their relationships to the literature of affective piety? The pseudo-Bonaventure *Meditationes Vitae Christi* makes much of Christ’s descent into hell, but it receives no mention here. How does the harrowing of hell function in these contexts?

Some of the problems with the book stem from the way Tamburr struggles with the medieval theology of the redemption. In Christian writing, the harrowing of hell developed as a vehicle to dramatize ideas and arguments concerned with the redemption of human kind. Tamburr makes reference to formulations of aspects of the redemption but in places fails to recognize their theological implications or the contexts out of which they grew, as in the discussion of Ælfric’s sermon for Palm Sunday (pp. 20–21). In the opening of chapter 4, Tamburr does not seem to grasp the dynamics and significances of Anselm’s pivotal work, the *Cur Deus Homo*, and fails to take account of the range of research on the changes in attitudes to the redemption that emerged in the twelfth century, following Anselm. Tamburr’s discussion of the harrowing of hell in *Piers Plowman* (B.XVIII/C.XX) refers to “the Devil’s rights theory of the atonement” (p. 145). First, “atonement” is not medieval but sixteenth-century usage (meaning “at-one-ment”), where it translates *reconciliatio* in the Bible; the more appropriate term for medieval literature and theology is “redemption.” Further, “the Devil’s rights” is not a theory of the redemption but refers to only one aspect of the medieval doctrine. In its many forms, the harrowing of hell is a mirror of changing attitudes and doctrine concerning the redemption. This monograph would have had more coherence had the author developed a firmer grasp of this purpose for the subject of the harrowing of hell.

Most of the problems, however, concern specific issues of method and the use of secondary material, and these raise questions about how well informed the book is. I have given a few examples here. As one would expect in something so wide ranging, modern scholarship serves as the

guide to primary sources, but in some instances the range of reference in secondary writing is narrow and incomplete. In 1933, J. A. MacCulloch published a classic monograph, the full title of which is *The Harrowing of Hell: A Comparative Study of an Early Christian Doctrine*. This book serves as Tamburr's main guide to the writings of the early church fathers where one would expect a synthesis based on more extensive and recent work on the secondary literature. Chapter 2 discusses the notion of Christ as the "warrior king" and makes much of the traditional theme of *Christus Victor*, but makes no use of or reference to Gustaf Aulén's classic book of the same title. Chapter 3 discusses the Seventh Blickling Homily and its Latin sources for the treatment of the harrowing of hell (pp. 72–73), but it fails to recognize that the third paragraph of the pseudo-Augustine *Sermo 160 De Pascha* has parallels in and very likely derives from chapters 22 and 23 of the Latin *Gospel of Nicodemus*, which explains why both texts contain the crucial statement of the devil's abuse of power. Tamburr's commentary on the homily (p. 73) is effectively a commentary on a portion of the *Gospel of Nicodemus*. For the York and Towneley plays of the harrowing, Tamburr seems not to be aware of the compiler's use of the Middle English *Stanzaic Gospel of Nicodemus* (pp. 121–22), and he does not recognize the significance for the play of the substitution of the debate between Jesus and Satan (lines 213–334) for the argument between Hell and Satan that originates in chapter 23 of the *Gospel of Nicodemus*: he discusses the form of this passage (pp. 125–28), but not what it indicates about how the compiler sought to adapt his raw material in response to contemporary ideas about the redemption. These points of reference are not obscure but are readily available in recent scholarship, and they should have been taken into account.

The bibliography needs to be brought up to date in certain areas. The most serious omission is James Cross's edition, *Two Old English Apocrypha and Their Manuscript Source: "The Gospel of Nicodemus" and "The Avenging of the Saviour"* (Cambridge University Press, 1996), which is based on an important discovery about the Latin textual tradition that lies behind the Old English translation and that for this and many other reasons replaces Hulme's printings of 1893 and 1903/4. The editions by Peter Clemoes and Malcolm Godden of Ælfric's homilies (EETS s.s. 5, 17, 18; 1979, 1997, 2000) have replaced Thorpe's edition of 1844–46. S. A. J. Bradley's volume of translations of Old English poetry (1982) has replaced R. K. Gordon's (1926) in the Everyman series.

This book is a worthwhile project with much of interest, and there is no doubting the author's enthusiasm for the subject. Unfortunately it contains a number of flaws that are distracting. A critical reading before publication could have detected and put right many of these problems.

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ALFRED THOMAS. *A Blessed Shore: England and Bohemia from Chaucer to Shakespeare*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2007. Pp. 256. \$45.00.

"A quarrel in a far away country between people of whom we know nothing": with these words, Neville Chamberlain justified the Munich Agreement of 1938 to his English constituents, dismissing as irrelevant the struggles over the border regions of the young state of Czechoslovakia. The great chasm separating the British Isles from Bohemia—a kingdom roughly coextensive with today's Czech Republic—was not simply geographical, of course. India and its political interests seemed near enough to Chamberlain's still-imperial Britain. Nor, apparently, was this particular chasm a recent development. Shakespeare's attribution of a coastline to landlocked Bohemia in *The Winter's Tale* has frequently been cited as evidence of long-standing English ignorance of the most basic features of the small, central European kingdom. If subsequent events transformed Chamberlain's proud "appeasement" into one of foreign policy's dirtiest words, they did little to bring Bohemia's inhabitants further into the consciousness of Anglophones. With the Czechs sequestered on the far side of the Iron Curtain, it became easier than ever to forget that Bohemia had belonged to Latin Christendom and that Prague had once been a leading city of the Holy Roman Empire, even the capital city of emperors Charles IV (1346–78) and Rudolf II (1576–1612).

Alfred Thomas reminds us of Bohemia's premodern prominence with a welcome literary history that seeks to bridge two important—if partly imaginary—chasms: between Bohemia and England and between the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. To do so, Thomas spans the academic divisions that separate the study of Europe's past and its vernacular liter-