

Seducing Augustine: Bodies, Desires, Confessions.

VIRGINIA BURRUS, MARK D. JORDAN, AND
KARMEN MACKENDRICK,
NEW YORK: FORDHAM UNIVERSITY PRESS, 2010.

One might wonder if there is much left to be said about Augustine's *Confessions* that has not been said one hundred times already. This small but engaging volume, born from ongoing collaboration between Burrus and MacKendrick dating back to 2004, demonstrates that commentary on the *Confessions* must continue because it is a text that beckons us (indeed *desires us*) to do so by the very beauty of its composition (124). At the heart of each chapter is an attempt to understand the perennially troubling issue of Augustine's approach to the body and to sex: is it, as has often been concluded, a wholly negative approach? The authors are out to challenge such casual assumptions while avoiding the impulse to historicize Augustine's sex life (which has often revealed more about his commentators than about the bishop himself), and ultimately paying particular attention to the moments of ambivalence, ambiguity, and even slippage within Augustine's elusive thought on these provocative themes.

The book is, in many ways, an attempt to address and reframe the concerns raised by Margaret Miles almost two decades ago in her important study *Desire and Delight: A New Reading of Augustine's Confessions*. For Miles, the seductive quality of the *Confessions* becomes, ultimately, a form of harassment. It is, she argues, a text that requires one to read "as a man" in order to appreciate Augustine's lush imagery of desire. As a result, it is also a text that violates the reader who refuses such masculine self-identification. In the present study, Virginia Burrus, Mark Jordan, and Karmen MacKendrick pay deference to Miles' significant contribution while recognizing that "we stand in a quite different intellectual moment" (8). Less concerned with whether one must reject or oppose Augustine – though, readers are reminded, the bishop ought not to be *excused* either – they seek instead to "divert," "pervert," or rather to turn him aside from his own truth (7). This method (at once playful and deeply serious) recognizes the mutual implication of text and reader in the act of interpretation. A quote toward the end of the introduction from the French theorist Jean Baudrillard signals to the reader the book's overarching method: "To be seduced is to challenge the other to be seduced" in return (7).

Each chapter of this book isolates a particular paradox within Augustine's famous meditation: chapter one explores secrecy and exposure (Burrus); chapter two, asceticism and eroticism (Jordan); chapter three, constraint and freedom (MacKendrick); and chapter four, time and eternity (Burrus again). The authors nimbly negotiate textual analysis, philology, engagement with previous scholarship, and potential

contact points with contemporary theorists. None of the authors miss the opportunity for an impressive turn of phrase.

Burrus, in the first chapter, aptly notes how Augustine's confessional output belies the fact that the bishop obscures as much (if not more!) than he reveals. Drawing upon Augustine's famous comment that he has become "a great question to himself," Burrus goes on to demonstrate (following Derrida) how the act of confession – whether consciously or unconsciously – is inescapably accompanied by equivocation (13). Indeed, the incautious reader might miss the fact that Augustine never actually delivers the goods on his seedy past. Burrus' contention is that, while Augustine attempts to relegate his previous desires to oblivion, those anonymous figures (i.e. the rejected lover, the deceased friend) continue to exert influence over the very shape of his present desire.

Beginning with a detailed analysis of Augustine's pedagogical semiotics in *De Doctrina Christiania*, Jordan's chapter suggests that the Incarnation is instructive precisely because "it is the most seductive speech" (34). Jordan avers that, in *De Doctrina*, Augustine replaces the body of the teacher (i.e. Christ) with that of the teaching institution (i.e. the Church) as an attempt to "sustain desire" for God in the absence of God's incarnate body (44). Thus, in turning to the *Confessions*, Jordan shows how the movement of incarnation is reversed: flesh is transformed into words (52). He convincingly demonstrates how this inversion of incarnation-logic is made most explicit in the climactic scene of Book 8. There, Augustine is replaced in his own conversion story by the didactic words of Romans 13 (53, 59).

The third chapter, by Karmen MacKendrick, examines the mutual dependency of "freedom and submission." In *Confessions* 10.39.40, Augustine famously proclaims to God: "You command continence; grant what you command, and command what you will." Through an exploration of the "eroticism of obedience" (64), MacKendrick unpacks how obedience often functions both as an excuse from culpability and as reversal of power dynamics. Thus, in what follows, she helpfully explicates the "paradox of humility" in which submission potentially gives rise to arrogance (74-75). Drawing upon Augustine's portrayal of his friendship with Alypius, MacKendrick illuminates the complicated dance between submission and resistance which, curiously, "keeps the will actively engaged" (77) in its striving toward an unattainable perfection. One of her most provocative conclusions is that Augustine's persistence in petitioning God for obedience "may very nearly play at dominating God" (81). What is the theological or rhetorical significance, MacKendrick seems to ask the reader, when someone *demand*s that God grant them *humility*?

In the fourth and final chapter, Burrus offers an impressive appraisal of the theme of desire within Books 10-13 of the *Confessions*. It is impressive in no small part because those final books often pose such a problem to many who see them as non-sequitur in light of the narrative preceding them. Burrus accomplishes this synthesis by drawing together related themes not only from the earlier portions of the *Confessions* but also from Augustine's rather quixotic meditations on heavenly desire from the *City of God*. The fanciful ruminations found there, says Burrus, are "so unnatural, so perverse" that the reader encounters the site at which Augustine can no longer continue the balancing act between (temporal) mastery and (eternal) submis-

sion (103). While there may not be “time” for sex in heaven according to Augustine, Burrus notes that the heavenly bodies are yet still *bodies* constituted by eternal sensations and, as a result, eternal desires (114).

In four brief chapters, this book proves itself to be a timely, learned and careful study of one of the “Great Books” in Western literature. More than that, it is also a refreshing and challenging reappraisal of the knotty issues (e.g. desire, sexuality, gender, embodiment, etc.) that have vexed and exercised readers of Augustine for the better part of the last 30 years. Here is a reading of Augustine’s *Confessions* at once deeply attuned to the history of scholarship, carefully leveraging the insights of critical theory in order to open surprising new doorways of inquiry into this well-worn text. While the stylistic and methodological tendencies of these authors may not suit all readers, one need not be versed in theory to appreciate the questions and interventions that percolate throughout the book. *Seducing Augustine* is a most welcome contribution to scholarship on the *Confessions* and provides a much needed reassessment of its most provocative themes.

JOHN DAVID PENNIMAN
FORDHAM UNIVERSITY