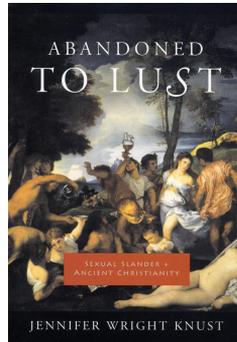


# ○ REVIEW OF JENNIFER KNUST, *ABANDONED TO LUST: SEXUAL SLANDER AND ANCIENT CHRISTIANITY*

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When Irenaeus declares that the heretics he opposes are ‘slaves to lust’ (*Adv. Haer.* 5.8.4), or Justin Martyr accuses the emperor of being lured into ‘porneia and greed’ (*I Apol.* 14), we would be forgiven if cigars and little black dresses come to our mind. Bill and Monica find themselves standing alongside Antony and Cleopatra in a long line of those speared by the intersection of sex and politics; accusations of sexual misconduct have, as Knust notes at the outset of her book, ‘frequently served as important rhetorical weapons’ (1). We might expect the employment of sexualised invective from politicians like Ken Starr or Cassius Dio, but we may well ask why early Christians also used such weaponry. This is precisely the point of Knust’s book. She notes that there is always the possibility that at least a few of the Christian heretics were the ‘sexually promiscuous promoters of orgies for Christ’ (3) that they were accused of being, just as we know that Clinton in fact did have sexual relations with ‘that woman’. Such is the approach of many historians who accept as accurate the depravity of the Valentinians, Simonians, Nicolaitians and other rivals of Justin and Irenaeus. But as Knust argues, in reality, sexual charges tell us far more about both the cultural assertions about sex and morality of the period and the competitive power relations between various groups. As she says:

Once the legitimacy of a position or group has been linked to a particular definition of sexual virtue, accusations of sexual vice become a potent weapon for distinguishing insiders from outsiders, policing groups boundaries, and eliminating rivals. Moreover, sexual slurs... can serve as an important resistance strategy: the pretensions of an elite are efficiently skewered by their (supposed) subordinates once the emptiness of their claims to virtue have been exposed (pp. 3–4).

Early Christian authors, Knust tells us, utilised sexualised invective for all these purposes.

In this book – the published version of her Columbia University dissertation – Knust explores these complex interrelationships between sex, gender and power. She begins with an analysis of ancient invective during the Roman period, arguing that discourses of virtue and vice were fundamental to the ‘art of rhetoric’ (19). Within this, a picture of the ideal man emerges – a citizen who displayed the virtues of nobility, bravery, temperance, piety, honour, and above all, self-mastery. Correspondingly, warnings about overindulgence in pleasure and luxury and the vices of enslavement to lust, effeminacy, lack of self-restraint and so on abounded. Knust suggests that sexualised invective was thus integral to the ‘naturalization of status norms’ (26), and as a result, categories of status were heavily contested, permeable and ‘always dangerously subject to renegotiation’ (28). Utilising the works of key scholars, such as Kenneth Dover, David Halperin, Eve Cantarella, Amy Richlin and Maude Gleason, and providing examples from the ancient writers themselves, such as Plutarch, Lucian, Demosthenes, Apuleius, and Musonius Rufus, Knust outlines ancient constructions of sexuality, and concludes that sexual slander was not only prevalent as an ancient rhetorical strategy, but was part and parcel of Greek and Roman sex- and gender-status discourse.

The following chapters of Knust’s book examine the participation of early Christians in this rhetorical technique, particularly the subversive aspect of such Christian discourse; she states, ‘If ‘the elite’ were supposedly ‘those who are virtuous’, then Christian arguments about their own virtue, against the vice of everybody else, can be read as a direct challenge to the legitimacy of ‘the elite’, including Rome and ‘her’ emperor’ (50). She firstly analyses the Pauline material, placing Paul well within the context of the Greco-Roman rhetorical world, but without neglecting an examination of the anti-gentile sexualised invective found in the Hebrew Bible and various post-exilic writings. According to Knust, Paul’s juxtaposition of the saints in Christ, who exercise self-mastery (1 Cor 7), with gentiles, who are ‘enslaved to lust’ (Rom 1), places him in a ‘long-standing polemical strategy familiar to Greeks, Judeans, and Romans alike: vilifying outsiders and defining insiders on the basis of sexual virtue and vice’ (63–4). Her readings of Romans and 1 Corinthians, upon which she focuses her argument, are stimulating and insightful. She highlights, for example, the fact that although much of Paul’s arguments are presented in sexual terms, sexual morality was not always the central concern; what was crucial for Paul was the distinction between those ‘in Christ’ and those who live ‘according to the flesh’. She concludes with the point that:

If, in a Greco-Roman context, an ‘elite’ was one who avoids excess, masters desire, conforms to ‘natural’ gender, and displays virtue, then Paul’s condemnation of gentiles – they are incapable of mastering desire – suggests that only the followers of Christ were truly ‘elite’... Paul does not really challenge the terms of this argument... rather he reconfigures this cultural logic in order to claim elite status for his group exclusively... a hostile rhetorical move in the first-century Mediterranean world (pp. 85–6, 71).

Knust continues with an examination the use of sexualised invective in second century Christian *Apologia*, in particular that of Justin Martyr. Once again, we discover that the arguments put forth by Justin served several purposes; outsiders are pushed away, insiders are policed, and

sexual morality is both constituted and defined as a 'Christian' virtue. And in the process, these arguments re-gendered the Christian as 'male' – 'Christian self-mastery is offered as proof of Christian "manliness"' (112). The following two chapters then consider the ways in which early Christian writers dealt with those *within* the Christian group who were seen as heretics – again we find that charges of sexual licentiousness were used in denouncing those with whom one disagreed. Knust calls into question the historical reliability of such charges but notes that she is more interested in the definition of sexual propriety that these charges presuppose and in the power relationships that they seek to establish or undermine. She examines the epistles of Jude and 2 Peter and *The Shepherd of Hermas*, before returning to Justin Martyr and also Irenaeus. Drawing on the work of scholars such as Elaine Pagels and Elizabeth Clark, Knust continues to show how these writers employed 'sex talk' (160) to defend and define group boundaries, privileging one Christian group at the expense of another. She concludes that:

Charges of sexual licence against the heretics reflected an attempt on the part of early Christian authors to develop a sexualised disciplinary discourse that could be effective at eliminating their opponents, protect them from their non-Christian critics, and enhance their own status as the authentic bearers of Christian tradition... As such, the implied content of sexual immorality was subject to constant reinterpretation and renegotiation by those who attempted to define and constitute them for the sake of their own persuasive projects (pp. 160, 163).

Inviting – and compelling – us to recognise this complex interrelationship between sex, gender, and power in these writings is Knust's significant contribution with this book; for anyone working in the areas of New Testament and early Christian thought, this book ought to be not only useful, but potentially transformative.

My one quibble with this book I hesitate to mention, given that firstly, this book is the published version of a doctoral thesis, and that secondly, it indicates an enormous amount scholarly research done by the author. But, it is a quibble nevertheless. When one holds this book, it feels substantial – a hardcover work of over 300 pages – yet only half of this is actual text; endnotes and bibliography alone account for 105 pages. Couple this with the frequent repetition of certain concepts and points throughout the book (namely, that sexual slander is a rhetorical tool of group self-definition – outsiders are denounced through sexualised invective, the virtue of self-mastery is claimed as a uniquely Christian trait etc. etc.), and one is left feeling a little put out. To put it bluntly, I wanted more book for my buck! There are two other books in the *Gender, Theory, and Religion* series to which this book belongs;<sup>1</sup> I could only lay my hands on the one by Elizabeth Castelli, and discovered a ratio of two-thirds text to one-third 'the rest' – a more academically (and aesthetically) pleasing balance overall. However, as stated above, this is merely a quibble, and as also stated above, this book is potentially revolutionary in its thesis. Next time we hear sexual invective being thrown at someone in power, be that political or religious, may we be a little more attuned to the power dynamic at work than the details of cigars and clothing.

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## ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Elisabeth Castelli's *Martyrdom and Memory: Early Christian Culture Making* (2004), and Susan Ackerman's *When Heroes Love: The Ambiguity of Eros in the Stories of Gilgamesh and David* (2005).