

Review of April D. DeConick, *Holy Misogyny: Why the Sex and Gender Conflicts in the Early Church Still Matter*, New York/London: Continuum 2011, xiv + 182 pp., ISBN 978-0-8264-0561-6

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In this lucid and logically arranged book, April D. DeConick, professor of Religious Studies at Rice University, makes a presentation of the ways in which women appear or don't appear in the ancient religious record. This book is directed in the first place to a general audience and good undergraduates. It should interest scholars too, however. DeConick canvasses a broad range of sources and presents complexities that will interest advanced readers and provoke reflection among them. In terms of methodology, the author has an appropriately hybrid mode of working that keeps in view both the gendered meanings to be found in sacred writings and the power these writings had (and still have) as ideological structures that guide the realization of gender. DeConick also often reads against the grain of perceptible authorial intention(s) to discover that which has been erased or nearly erased.

In an introduction and nine chapters (with a list of further readings, notes [mostly references to the primary sources], and a helpful index), this book tracks the place of the feminine and women in religious thought starting from before Christianity and then focusing on the first four centuries CE. In the final chapter, DeConick considers ways in which misogynistic readings of scripture, canonized through sheer repetition, still have power to shape current-day ecclesiastical policy. She discusses in this context the backtracking of the Southern Baptist Convention on the role of women in the church and the Catholic church's reiterated opposition to women priests.

In the introduction ('A lady god?') and first two chapters, DeConick speaks of the progressive occlusion of the feminine. Reading the Old Testament closely in Chapter 1 ('Where did God the mother go?'), the author argues that once

Yahweh had a consort. She was the Queen of Heaven and she was left behind in the move to monolatry among the Jews. DeConick then speaks in Chapter 2 ('Why was the spirit neutered?') of the occlusion of the female spirit (in Hebrew *ruah* and in Aramaic *ruha*) and her transgending into neuter in Greek and masculine in Latin. One possible complication to the author's argument, as far as a transformation of the female spirit into the neuter or masculine spirit known from, say, Nicene orthodoxy, is that the Septuagint would have been the way many early Christians came to know the Old Testament. There the spirit is always already neuter. However, within the broader march of history, the point holds well enough. DeConick also points out the thoroughly understandable attribution of female qualities to God in some of the Christian traditions. What has been pushed out reemerges to rescue a dynamic that threatens to become either completely and sterilely masculine (God + masculine Spirit), or an equally sterile combination of masculine and neuter (God + neuter Spirit).

Having suggested multiple ways the occlusion occurs within the tradition leading up to Christianity and during the first centuries of this era (and in the latter case making interesting use of some Syriac sources), DeConick considers Jesus and Paul in Chapters 3 ('Did Jesus think sex is a sin?') and 4 ('Did Paul silence women?') and their important approaches to the place of women. The focus of the book on the devaluation of the female body and of women more generally becomes appropriately sharper now. In the chapter on Jesus, the author finds that he was sensitive to the place of women and that this sensitivity was central to his concerns. Paul delivers mixed messages. He both recommends marriage and chastity, the former informed by pragmatics and the latter by his sense that the apocalypse was nigh. The split in Paul presages tension that will surface repeatedly in the centuries to come on the question of women: are women to behave as good matrons, or is the end close and terrestrial gender roles are no longer to be thought of in the same way?

In Chapters 5 ('Is marriage a sin?') and 6 ('Is marriage salvation?'), DeConick contrasts sex- and gender-denying approaches with ones that embrace in various ways the physical realities of men and women. In Chapter 5, we read of female martyrs and saints who become male and then of figures such as Tatian, Marcion, and Montanus who took a dim view of sexual behaviour. With nice detail, the author reveals that a rejection of sex and gender (and of the fecundity of the female body) could be empowering. Featuring a focus on the Gnostic Valentinians, Simonians, Carpocratians, and various groups identified by Epiphanius of Salamis, DeConick's arguments in Chapter 6 squint to see ways the physical realities of sex and marriage were integrated into the lives of Christians in these groups. It is of course hard to decide what exactly was going on because of the hostile nature of the source involved.

Chapter 7 ('Once a woman, always a woman?') details the way in which women, among groups who claimed the title of orthodox, were demoted from the positions of authority they seem to have held in previous times. Assimilated to Eve in the most damaging way possible, women were held responsible for much that was wrong in the world, and they were therefore to be subservient. In Chapter 8 ('How do we solve a problem like Maria?'), DeConick dexterously considers the vicissitudes of the figure of Mary Magdalene in the record. Clearly important, Mary has been subject to misrepresentation and occlusion in many different ways starting with the synoptic gospels. The author's choice of her as a case-study is a brilliant move that sums up many of the concerns of the book.

Chapter 9 ('Because the Bible tells us so?') concludes the book in general terms and fulfills the promise of the second half of the book's title.

Taking an unwieldy topic, because it is so large, DeConick successfully addresses a general audience and also gives scholars things to think about. I also think this book would be an excellent choice to use in a course on women in the early church. It could play a central role with carefully selected primary and secondary sources added. A further feature of the book is a series of insets (at least one to a chapter and often more than that) that display an item of material culture and some musing on it along with bibliography. Each one of them is called 'Digging In'. They take the argument forward in time often, and they are uniformly well done.

I do have a few complaints. DeConick should have at least included Kathy Gaca's *The Making of Fornication: Eros, Ethics, and Political Reform in Greek Philosophy and Early Christianity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003) in the further reading. Gaca's arguments suggest that the claims of misogyny centered on the body as nearly the whole story at the end of the book are not the whole story. The role of women in the church changes as Christianity is positioned and repurposed by such figures as Tatian and Clement (both discussed by DeConick) in relation to a lengthy philosophical inheritance, which Gaca discusses. Too, there are masculine anxieties about 'passivity' and the fact that the female body is not only reviled, it is also desired. I also would have appreciated DeConick addressing the reasonable concerns any reader would have about using Epiphanius as a source for Eucharistic practices involving the consumption of semen and menstrual blood. Epiphanius' goal is surely not disinterested description and DeConick should not report his observations as though it were. There are also two little things involving the same word which are surely artifacts of the proofing stage: *enkrateia* (p. 76) is not an adjective and, further, it is spelled, inconsistently, as *encrateia* on p. xi.

The relevance of this book to questions of religion and gender is unquestionable. DeConick problematizes (as have many in recent years: Elizabeth Castelli, Elizabeth Clarke, and Virginia Burrus come to mind) masculinist interpretations of the Judaeo-Christian heritage, and takes us closer to doctrinal understandings and, indeed, a history that are usable.