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# Penetrating Death

SAINTS, HYSTERICIS, AND THE EXPRESSIVE BODY

Attendees of the panel “Penetrating Death” were treated to four well-informed papers investigating the manner in which female bodies have been probed and evaluated by patriarchal “experts” throughout history; while tied thematically, the papers ranged widely in historical specificity, from predynastic Egypt to late Victorian England. The first speaker, Christine Gottlieb of UCLA, examined the “epistemology of gynecology” in the late nineteenth century in her paper, “Penetrating Knowledge and Attacking Mysteries: The Cases of *Dracula* and *Dora*.” By reading the novel *Dracula* in tandem with Freud’s account of his hysterical patient *Dora*, Gottlieb demonstrated how *Dracula*’s obsession with actual and metaphorical penetration pertains to the dominant medical discourse of its day. Just as the physician Van Helsing is allowed intimate access to the rooms, tombs, and bodies of his female patients, Freud’s narrative

reveals a desire to penetrate female hysteria through inserting his own “key” to its mystery. The second paper, given by Brown University’s Stephen Higa, exhibited a like interest in the historical probing of female bodies for meaning. Entitled “Exposing Virgins in Early Norman England,” Higa’s paper concentrated on the paradoxical representation of virgins by the eleventh-century hagiographer Goscelin. On the one hand, the sanctified virgin could repel access to marauders even from within her tomb, so sealed and cloistered was her body. On the other hand, church authorities performed sensual and pleasurable examinations of the corpses of sainted women and recorded their findings in lascivious detail. Higa’s paper intimated the importance of approaching issues of gender on terms specific to the cultural and historical moment, which was the primary thesis of the third paper, given by Krystal Lords of UCLA. Lords’ paper, “The Importance of

Gender Studies for Predynastic Egypt: A Case Study of Cemetery N7000 at Naga-ed-Deir,” claimed that early Egyptologists only considered gender in their studies to the end of determining whether women enjoyed equal or subjugated status in the predynastic period of 5,000–3,000 B.C.E. Lords’ own archaeological work with the bodies and objects discovered at Naga-ed-Deir suggests that a more nuanced approach is in order, one which looks to the material culture to deduce the particular roles enacted by each gender. The fourth paper, presented by Ericka Swensson-Tsagakis of USC, returned us to Goscelin and early Norman England. In “An Abbess Entombed: St. Mildrith and Female Monastic Enclosure,” Swensson-Tsagakis focused on how the removal of the remains of a powerful female saint effectively neutralized her popularity. After the Norman Conquest the authority of female monks was greatly curtailed, and the appropriation of

Mildrith's remains by St. Augustine's Abbey, a move which enabled the elevation of the male saint over the female one, provides one such example of the gendering of Christian worship in the medieval period. Moderator Lisa Bitel of USC raised a variety of issues through which the papers might speak to each other ideologically, and chief among her concerns was the question of agency: in what ways, if any, did female bodies resist or encourage access to the patriarchal narratives imposed upon them? While no answer to this question (or the others provoked by "Penetrating Death") could ever be the final word on such a complex and multivalent topic, the panel revealed the surprising perseverance of gender bias across a broad cross-section of academic disciplines. But if female bodies have typically been subjected to patriarchal inscription in the past, a new generation of scholars promises to discover and assert a more balanced and inclusive perspective.

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