



Emma Gee, *Mapping the Afterlife: From Homer to Dante* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020). Online, \$85, eISBN:9780190670511

Review

L.P. Hartley once famously said, ‘The past is a foreign country.’ Such a sentiment applies doubly to past approaches to the world, especially when considering issues that reflect historical views on life. Emma Gee’s *Mapping the Afterlife: From Homer to Dante* treats the concept of the afterlife in such a way. Gee deconstructs and challenges the ways in which Christian teleologies have shaped scholarly views of classical approaches to the afterlife and attempts to map ‘the *topography* of the afterlife’ (p. 9). Using the language of music, she attempts to bridge together seemingly incompatible concepts and ideas into a harmonious entity, and depicts ancient views of the afterlife as a search for harmony that is impossible in the real world.

The overall argument of the monograph revolves around the very complexity of Classical views of the afterlife. Part 1 follows a variety of pairings that emerge as essential to ancient literature of the afterlife, including the spatial problem of Herakles in the *Odyssey* regarding the division between the underworld and the heavens – that Herakles somehow simultaneously exists in two places, with his ‘image’ residing in the underworld and his ‘self’ residing with the gods – and its implications on understandings of both the afterlife and human identity (Chapter 1). Gee also discusses in this part the dichotomy between ‘real and imaginary landscapes’ (p. 64) and the influence of the former on the latter in Virgil’s *Aeneid* (Chapter 2), and Claudian’s ekphrastic presentation of Proserpina’s tapestry in *De raptu Proserpinae* [*Rape of Persephone*] as a kind of spatial map, representing different kinds of imaginary space resembling ‘real space’ from the fourth century (Chapter 3).

Part 2 moves away from geographical images of the afterlife to visions of the celestial afterlife. First, it presents the different approaches to space in Virgil – the ‘underworld journey and the cosmic vision,’ and revisits the inconsistency in Virgil’s *Aeneid* 6. Gee compares the allegorical understanding of *Aeneid* 6.724 to

interpretations of Dante's *Paradiso*, in which the structure of the universe, with souls strewn about the heavens, is used didactically to communicate the nature of the soul (Chapter 4). Gee then describes how musical allegory is often used to describe ancient views of the afterlife, specifically regarding conceptions of the harmony of the spheres, notably how Cicero's *Somnium Scipionis* [*Dream of Scipio*] envisions the harmony of the spheres as harmonic (Chapter 5) and how, in a following chapter in Part 3, 'Plato's Soulscapes,' Plato's interpretation of the Spindle of Necessity in the *Republic* relates the mathematical principles of 'harmonic series,' with the Spindle representing 'astronomical and musical harmony,' (p. 190) and of harmony as governing the soul as much as the planets (Chapter 6).

The rest of part 3 discusses the rest of Plato's 'eschatalogical myths' (p. 219) in *Phaedrus* (Chapter 7) and *Phaedo* (Chapter 8), presenting both an interplay between 'journey and vision' and how scientific models become incorporated into understandings of the soul. Between chapters 5 and 6 lies exists an 'Intermezzo,' which articulates a vision of the universe as revolving around concepts of circular motion, with the soul implicated in the 'expansion of order in the universe' (p. 11). Part 4 follows how reconsiderations of the cosmos reflect on and impact understandings of the human role in the cosmos, first with an examination of how Plutarch relates the tripartite human being with the tripartite cosmos in Plutarch (Chapter 9) and Dante's *Commedia* (Chapter 10).

Gee's work is ambitious in several respects, from its non-chronological approach to its sheer breadth of coverage. Gee's insistence on a psychological approach, while somewhat idiosyncratic, does help 'map' the topography of the afterlife without shoehorning concepts or ideas into preexisting teleologies (specifically those of Christianization as an inevitable endpoint). And the effort to adequately capture a complex, variegated field is valuable, particularly in conveying how descriptions of the afterlife integrate contemporary scientific knowledge. However, there are occasional issues. The effort to avoid a strictly chronological approach more aptly reflects the complex nature of the topic, but also complicates

following the argument as it traverses between varying authors and centuries. More complicated to grapple with is the abrupt shift from language of topography to that of harmony, which while interesting and well justified, is somewhat abrupt and unharmonious for her overall argument.

Overall, though, what Gee has done is an impressive and valuable addition to existing scholarship on views of the afterlife. Her effort to map the afterlife in all its complexity and nuance is a valuable model for other scholars, and provides an important guidebook for navigating the foreign terrain of the afterlife.

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