Review Essay: Schmidt, Gary D. *The Iconography of the Mouth of Hell: Eighth-Century Britain to the Fifteenth Century*

L. A. Doherty

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/rmmra

Part of the Comparative Literature Commons, History Commons, Philosophy Commons, and the Renaissance Studies Commons

**Recommended Citation**

Available at: https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/rmmra/vol15/iss1/16

This Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in Quidditas by an authorized editor of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact scholarsarchive@byu.edu, ellen_amatangelo@byu.edu.
expertly coordinated; the essays cover many different topics and are rich in detail; last but not least, it is a pleasure to read the articles.

Ingrid Baumgärtner
Augsburg/Princeton


Gary Schmidt introduces his topic with brief passage from "A Good Man Is Hard to Find," by Flannery O'Connor. The reader must certainly become interested if only to ask what Flannery O'Connor might have to do with the iconography of the medieval hell mouth. Indeed, it is an interesting means by which to demonstrate the adaptability of the hell mouth to the time period in which it is used—the crux of Schmidt’s argument throughout *The Iconography of the Mouth of Hell*. Schmidt attempts to establish the origins of the medieval hell mouth with numerous examples and illustrations—origins that he states in his introduction have not been fully established or well documented by previous scholars such as Wildrige, Wall, Guldan, and Galpern.

Schmidt initially focuses his attention on establishing the point in time that the hell mouth first began to appear in the tenth century. Once this is established, he moves away from the question of time and focuses on usage of the hell mouth as a symbol that could convey a multitude of meanings to a diverse audience. The clerical audience of the monastic reform is shown to have relied upon the hell mouth to serve much the same purpose as illustrations in books today: they provide a visual link to the text. The hell mouth was also used in private devotional literature with the same purpose in mind, to serve as a visual illustration of the text itself, not to be a replacement for the text. Schmidt does, however, suggest that a correlation could be made
between the change in usage of the hell mouth and the size of the reading audience and the availability of texts to read. The significance of the hell mouth to the public audience would be seen as more than a visual link. It would serve as a reminder, a symbol that would instantly bring to mind a variety of religious teachings and the penalties for transgression.

However, it was not until the twelfth century that the hell mouth began to appear in the public domain, undergoing changes that would eventually lead to a “universally recognizable image” (84). In addition, Schmidt documents a shift from the original symbolism of the hell mouth as simply the entrance into hell to the hell mouth becoming one of the torments of hell itself. Schmidt also provides numerous examples of the many changes and artistic alterations that the hell mouth underwent between the twelfth and mid-fifteenth centuries which eventually led to the use of the hell mouth in stage dramas beginning in the fourteenth century. Schmidt provides sketches of elaborate scaffold designs of the hell mouth as well as stage records to substantiate the magnitude of the hell mouth’s importance.

Finally, Schmidt concludes with a brief overview of the origin and evolution of the medieval hell mouth, including its continued appearance over the centuries in modern dramas and texts. Thereby, he brings his readers full circle and leaves them with a sense of having made a complete journey from the present into the past and back again.

L. A. Doherty


Henry Staten’s broadly ranging, yet rigorously disciplined, book examines the phenomenon of mourning in the Western religious-philosophical tradition, or more specifically said, “the phenomena of the dialect of mourning” (8). The book contains three chapters that