

[Kristine A. Wolberg, "All Possible Art": George Herbert's "The Country Parson," Madison and Teaneck, NJ: Farleigh Dickinson University Press, 2008. 165 pp.](#)

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Article:

George Herbert's prose pastoral manual has from the start been both linked to and overshadowed by his poetry. Completed in 1632, before his much more famed posthumous lyric masterpiece *The Temple* (1633), but not published until 1652, Herbert's most extensive prose work was, as Kristine A. Wolberg notes, the only piece of writing that he personally prepared for publication as, simply, *The Country Parson* (Wolberg updates the spelling). However, the remarkable popularity of *The Temple* (it was a true seventeenth-century best-seller) induced the printer to add *A Priest to the Temple* to the manual's title as a kind of marketing hook. Apparently it worked; the book played a unique role in the history of pastoral care, inspiring *The Reformed Pastor* (1656) by Puritan Richard Baxter, who pronounced Herbert's poetry and prose to be filled with "Heart-work and Heaven-work." *The Country Parson* also added to the luster of Herbert's reputation as the pattern of Anglican godliness, so that he has been, in his elder brother Edward's semi-snide words, "little less than sainted." However, as Wolberg also notes, this linkage has meant, ironically, that *The Country Parson* has since been treated mainly as a contextual annex to *The Temple* rather than as a free-standing, well-wrought literary structure.

Wolberg's purpose in "All Possible Art" is to excavate and display the foundational importance of *The Country Parson*:

[t]hrough exploring Herbert's theme, form, topics, emphasis, context, and possible models, we shall find . . . a carefully conceived and executed work, making sophisticated use of popular sacred and secular materials for a calculated effect, and certainly worth attention in its own right as part of Herbert's literary legacy. (p. 13)

Wolberg contends that the most important of the possible secular models for this artful sacred manual is that of the Renaissance courtesy book.

This claim would seem to take her down a now well-beaten path; after all, she concedes, as far back as the 1940's, and especially over the past two decades, many scholars have recognized the important influence on Herbert of courtly advice books, from M. M. Mahood, Marion White Singleton, and Michael Schoenfeldt to Cristina Malcolmson, Ronald Cooley, and the present reviewer (pp. 15-16, 135 n. 1). However, Wolberg makes a solid contribution to this vein of courtly interpretation by demonstrating the extent and substance of Herbert's debt to a particular courtesy book, *The Civile Conversation* by Stefano Guazzo.

For a poet as iconically and devoutly English as Herbert to be jinked to a courtly Italian model may come as a surprise, if not a shock; it was Roger Ascham who wrote that *Inglese Italianato è un diavolo incarnato*, and it was Herbert himself who, in *The Church-Militant*, warned apocalyptically against Thames being polluted by Tiber. However, Wolberg shows that Guazzo's was in many ways a kindred spirit to Herbert's: unlike the notably secular Giovanni Della Casa's *Galatea*, or Baldassare Castiglione's *Ii Cortegiano* (let alone Niccolò

Machiavelli's *Principe*), Guazzo's *Civile Conversation* anticipates *The Country Parson's* "similar religious tone, a shared love for scripture and pious proverbs, and a concern for the doctrine and lives of their respective clergy" (p. 92).

Wolberg makes a convincing case that Herbert would have known Guazzo's book: it was available not only in Italian (which Herbert could read) but also in two later Elizabethan English translations; it was quoted on a par with Della Casa and Castiglione in the late Tudor and early Stuart courts; and, tellingly, it was specifically recommended by Herbert's eldest brother Edward in his *Autobiography* as a model of "the discreet civility which is to be observed in communication either with friends or strangers" (pp. 90-91). Also tellingly, many of the foreign proverbs that Herbert quotes in *The Country Parson* and in the *Outlandish Proverbs* (1640) seem to come directly from *The Civile Conversation* (p. 91); and most strikingly of all, Herbert's central theme that parsons are "to do what Christ did, and after his manner, both for Doctrine and Life"—seems directly to echo Guazzo's lament over the corrupt Italian clergy: "They ought . . . by their good life and doctrine to amend their naughtie lives" (p. 99). "I pray you tell mee what you thinke to bee the end and marke that wise and worthie men shoote at?" asks Guazzo. As if in answer, Herbert writes, "I have resolved to set down the Form and Character of a true Pastour, that I may have a Mark to aim at" (p. 89).

Wolberg's purpose in this slender book is not only to demonstrate Herbert's debt to the courtesy book tradition in general and to Guazzo in particular; it is also to argue "somewhat polemically" that a proper appreciation of *The Country Parson* as a kind of sacred courtesy book will correct a common critical tendency to over-internalize and doctrinalize Herbert's spiritual vision.

His unexpected focus on the life of the country parson as opposed to the parson's beliefs and doctrinal purity issues further into three surprising emphases. Herbert stresses the importance of appearances while minimizing the role of the parson's inner life; he exalts the efficacy of experience rather than that of doctrine; and "good works" seem to usurp the central role usually assigned to faith in Protestant thinking. (p. 14)

Yet all of this Herbert does, she argues, ultimately to "cross party lines"; that is, to bring "elements from the Puritan and Anglo-Catholic traditions together in his ideal pastor" (p. 14).

Having introduced these claims in her introductory chapter, she continues in Chapter Two to contextualize *The Country Parson* within the heretofore largely Puritan genre of the pastoral manual, distinguishing Herbert from the much hotter Protestants who strongly stress the pastor's inward conversion; Herbert, she notes in contrast, emphasizes the parson's outward character. Chapter Three lays the groundwork for her further claim that Herbert's outward focus is modeled on the range of Renaissance courtesy books mentioned above, while Chapter Four continues this case with its more particular focus on Guazzo's *Civile Conversation*. Chapter Five then turns to distinguish the unique spiritual behaviorism of both Herbert and Guazzo from the secular self-fashioning of Castiglione and Della Casa, and her Conclusion draws out some larger implications of this rehabilitated spiritual externalism for our reading of *The Temple* itself. In short, Wolberg claims that Herbert—in contrast to Puritan pastoral writers like William Perkins, Richard Bernard, and even his great admirer Richard Baxter (pp. 54-56)—"believed in the efficacy of appearances and the power of the observable to shape the unobservable," whether in religion or in poetry (p. 133).

In taking this polemical turn, Wolberg hopes to correct an imbalance that she sees in much Herbert criticism: an over-emphasis on the transformation of the inner self by a kind of evangelical conversion at the expense of the role played by outward forms in shaping and defining the inner life, both religiously and poetically. As a case in point, she notes that even within *The Temple*, supposedly characterized by "its intimate voice and spiritual depths," the opening section called *The Church-porch* shocks many readers and critics with its "moralistic" stress on ((superficial" behavior. "These overtly didactic instructions on manners stand in strange contrast to the profoundly spiritual poetry that makes up the rest of *The Temple*," she observes (p. 130).

By highlighting Herbert's rather puzzling transition between the outwardly prudential Church-porch and the inwardly passionate *Church* sections of *The Temple*, Wolberg has pinpointed an essential-and I think intentional—site of spiritual, theological, and yes, doctrinal transformation in Herbert's work. However, the direction in which Wolberg takes this insight is, one might say, helpfully wrong. Wolberg is helpful to observe that 'The Church-porch' is to *The Temple* what *The Country Parson* is to the ministry, a preparatory 'courtesy book' that will allow true 'heart work and heaven work' . . . to go forward” (p. 131). Yet what Wolberg seems to miss is that for Herbert this true work cannot go forward without first going *inward*. Quoting the literally crucial words of the “Superliminare” (“over the door”) that stands appropriately between *The Church-porch* and *The Church*, she includes only the first half of the poetic invitation:

Thou, whom the former precepts have Sprinkled and taught, how to behave Thy self in church;
approach, and taste The Churches mystical repast.

But what seems like preparation pure and simple—a careful but possible Pelagian course in moral improvement—is suddenly and sternly brought up short by the concluding stanza (set off by a sharp dark line in the text):

Avoid profaneness; come not here: Nothing but holy, pure, and cleare, Or that which groneth to be so,
May at his peril further go.

These strong imperatives warn of grave danger for those entering with any remaining “prophaneness,” suggesting the foolhardy presumption of anyone claiming to have been prepared by mere sprinkling and good external behavior. The only reliably safe passage comes from that most inward of passwords, the groan.

What this crux shows is that the moralism and behaviorism that Wolberg rightly _observes in Herbert's extensive use of “courtesy book” conventions do indeed prepare the congregation for church. However, this preparation works not as some kind of manageable, gradated climb 'to *perfection*, but rather as a necessary invitation to *failure*. And necessary it is. Much as, in classic Pauline (and Protestant) theology the Law, while “holy, just, and good,” functions primarily to convict the soul (in Herbert's phrase) of “dust and sin,” so the Parson's regime of moral example and exhortation leads the spiritual seeker to the church door, and leaves him there, suddenly aware of the impossibility of safe entry, groaning for mercy and grace. Wolberg has, unaccountably, left out the groans.

Herbert's sudden halt in the preparation and progress of the would-be church-goer—this coming up short at the very door—is the poet-pastor's first dramatic intimation of a doctrine that will run throughout *The Church* like a leaden thread transmuted into gold: the anti-Pelagian, Augustinian, Luthero-Calvinist doctrine of total inability, a doctrine that, paradoxically, cannot be proven except by those who have tried strenuously and long and unsuccessfully to walk “holy, pure, and cleare.” Furthermore, this same paradox informs the basic aesthetics of *The Temple*: that is, Herbert's famous lover's quarrel with poetic beauty, his struggle to spell in a mystic and vanishing alphabet the “something” that only God understands, his heart-deep certainty that words cannot succeed but that the Word never fails. It is precisely true that, to use Wolberg's words, Herbert “believes in the efficacy of appearances and the power of the observable to shape the unobservable” (p. 133). But their efficacy is in their inefficacy, their shaping power in their demonstrated weakness. Once one has tried “all possible art” as try one must—it is the impossible art of groans and grace that opens the door.

Kristine Wolberg has done a valuable service by demonstrating an important source for Herbert's most important prose work, and by recognizing the crucially strong intrinsic relationship between the prose pastoral and Herbert's pastoral poetic. She certainly is right to show Herbert's intense involvement with outward life, with the world of behavior, and action, and courtesy. But as Herbert approaches not only the door of the church but also the presence chamber of the heavenly court—which he does at the heart of *The Temple* in “Sion”—he invokes the powerful inefficacy of heavy external things, and remembers that “all Solomons sea of brasse and world of stone / Is not so deare to thee as one good grone,” and that “grones” are music for a king.”