HEART-WORK: GEORGE HERBERT AND THE PROTESTANT ETHIC. By Cristina Malcolmson. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999. Pp. xi + 297; 6 illustrations. $45 (cloth).

By: Christopher Hodgkins

C. Hodgkins (2001). Cristina Malcolmson, Heart-Work: George Herbert and the Protestant Ethic. Journal of English and Germanic Philology 100: 588-91.

Article:

Although George Herbert recently turned 400, only during the past decade has he really come out in society. Herbert has of course long been a major figure for serious scholarly study, and the subject of many important monographs treating his religion and art from the 1950s on. However, it was not until the 1990s that literary critics began to deal much with Herbert in a fuller political and social setting, to connect his heavenly art with its earthly contexts of court, Parliament, city, country, village, parish, and family.

What the theologically-focused work of Joseph H. Summers, Barbara Lewalski, Richard Strier, Chana Bloch, and Gene Edward Veith has made ever clearer are the lineaments of Herbert's strongly Protestant faith; now the most recent wave of scholarship has been aSking what that faith meant on the ground in the socially fractile decades during which Herbert built his *Temple*. Michael C. Schoenfeldt, Christopher Hodgkins, Daniel W. Doerksen, and Jeffrey Powers-Beck have all, in different ways and degrees, returned us to the archives with questions about how "private devotion" spoke to more public concerns. Now comes what is very possibly the culmination of this trend towards socializing Herbert: Cristina Malcolmson's *Heart-Work: George Herbert* and *the Protestant Ethic*. This is an original, important, and exciting book; her measured critique of the dominant New Historicist approach is both necessary and welcome, and although she can't always resist the reductionist gravity of cultural materialism, she has more to say than any writer yet about why and how Herbert sought to connect his inward devotional life with his outward social role.

As her subtitle indicates, Malcolmson explores Herbert's subtle knotting of spirit and matter through the well-known Weberian phrase "the Protestant ethic"—a phrase which she rescues from any simplistic equation with capitalism and which she carefully locates in Herbert's early Stuart milieu. Malcolmson writes to correct recent historicist over-emphases on the theatrical model of personal identity in Tudor-Stuart studies, with its disruptively self-fashioned "persona"; instead, she turns to the less prepossessing but for Herbert certainly more appropriate paradigm, the Protestant doctrine of "vocation," the "calling" to serve God and society in a particular "state of life" (p. 3). Malcolmson argues that rather than constructing an "inner" self in dramatic opposition to an "outer" world, Herbert sought to connect and coordinate the inward and the outward with one another. Yet paradoxically, Herbert’s effort to inscribe this doctrine both on his private heart and his public work created the defining drama of his life.

So, first of all, *Heart-Work* demonstrates how enmeshed Herbert's life and writings were in a network of hierarchical Social relations. In her introduction, Malcolmson shows Herbert's place as a dependent satellite in the familial and political orbit centered on his mighty cousins William and Philip Herbert, the Third and Fourth Earls of Pembroke—nephews of Sir Philip Sidney and leaders of a "Protestant faction" at court whose fortunes fell with the Duke of Buckingham's rise. It was from this web of patronage that the young Herbert had hoped, like his brothers Edward and Henry, to find "great place," or at least "employment"; the failure of his secular career with the falling Pembroke fortunes caught him in "a world of strife" and prompted a spiritual

reassessment that is evidenced, she claims, in the transformations between the earlier and later versions of *The Temple*.

After broaching these patronage issues, Malcolmson turns in a sense to the end of the story in her first chapter, "*The Country Parson* and the Character of Social Identity." Here she argues that near the close of his short life—between 1630 and 1633—Herbert wrote his pastoral manual in order to cast off human in favor of divine patronage, to redefine his secular "failure" as "a willing renunciation of the role of an urban gentleman" (p. 28). In a culture where "a loss of rank is equivalent to a loss of self" (p. 27), Herbert embraces and advocates a new "public identity" through the role of parish priest: neither a courtier, nor a fine gentleman, nor a gallant, but instead a servant to "Jesus my Master," humble with the humble and bold against the proud. This chapter makes excellent sense of the paradoxical "respective boldness" that Herbert calls pastors and chaplains to use with their social "betters," warning the clergy that "over-submissivenesse" and "cringings" to the great will only make them "ever be dispised" (p. 34).

Chapter 2, "George Herbert and Coterie Verse," returns to the beginning of Herbert's career to argue that despite his reputation as a poet of "private meditation," the devotional lyrics of *The Temple* were "part of Herbert's lifelong performance within the Herbert circle" (p. 47). This circle, Malcolmson suggests, included not only his mother Magdelene, brother Edward, and other immediate relatives, but also his more distant connections to the Sidney family through the Pembrokes, as well as John Donne and Francis Bacon (pp. 47, 49). Though Malcolmson might more accurately have called this coterie "semi-private" rather than "public," poems like "Jordan" (II), "A Parodie," "The Answer," "The Posie," and "The Quip" do seem to show both Herbert's involvement in the family patronage system and his eventual alienation from it.

This alienation is examined in the third and fourth chapters, "Gentility and Vocation in the Original *Temple*" and "*The Temple* Revised: 'Selfnesse' and Pollution." Malcolmson considers the transformation of Herbert's social identity by closely comparing the earlier Williams (W) with the later Bodleian (B) manuscript. She l00ks first at the older W as work written, in a senSe, before the fall—that is, before the extinction of Herbert's "court-hopeS." This extinction she dates, speculatively but plausibly, to 1627, when it became "clear that the Catholic-leaning [Charles and his favorite, Buckingham, were unwilling to offer George the rewards of preferment" (pp. 22-23, 97). Significantly, it was soon after this definitive royal rejection, she argues, that Herbert began revising W into B (p. 97).

In Malcolmson's view, W's "original plan" for *The Temple* was more at home in the world, seeking to reconcile devotion and ambition by c00rdinating "a central inner piety with an external social ascent" (pp. 69-70). Following Strier, she finds this "prudential and self-enhancing" creed epitomized in "The Church-porch," with its versified homilies to the young gentleman seeking to advance himself both spiritually and societally through religious behavior (p. 71). W's version of the lyric sequence that follows in "The Church," she claims, presents the inner sanctum of devotion, but in an arrangement that does little to challenge the divinely-ordained social ambitions of the "gentleman" (p. 82). B, on the other hand, rearranges, revises, and adds to the lyrics of "The Church" in ways that reject the goal of easy social ascent and that contradict the prudential piety of "The Church- porch." Moreover, according to Malcolmson, Herbert's move away from the "pollution" of secular and ecclesiastical ambition also involves his rejecting the coterie games of poetic one-upmanship.

The final three chapters elaborate and complicate this developmental argument. Chapter 5, "The Character of Holiness in *The Temple*," glosses the lyrics of spiritual transparency in the B manuScript with similarly-dated prose passages in Herbert's *Country Parson* about purified social identity, passages which critique the pursuit of godliness for worldly gain. Chapter 6, "Pastoral, Vocation, and 'Private Benefit,'" explores these continuing tensions between godliness and gain throughout the remainder of Herbert's short life, claiming that this ongoing paradox mirrored contradictions within the Protestant ethic itself—its celebration of industriousness in conflict with its critique of social climbing. Chapter 7, "Religion and Enterprise in the Gardens of the Herbert Family," exemplifies this conflict by glossing Herbert's gardening poem "Paradise" with the particulars of three Herbertian family gardens: Sir John Danvers's at Chelsea, the Pembrokes' at Wilton House, and the colonial

plantation of Virginia. In each of these "moral gardens," the potential for transgressive overgrowth—for the seeking of merely "private benefit"—is held in check by deliberate pruning and a professed devotion to the "common good" (pp. 194, 200). In her conclusion, "Modern Criticism and the Ideology of Sincerity," Malcolmson critiques the modern tendency to judge Herbert sincere or insincere by the anachronistic standardS of autonomous "bourgeois subjectivity" (p. 206). Rather, she argues, we should recognize that Herbert was bound up in a more socially-normed concept of selfhood, shaped by the dynamics and the contradictions of a culture "in transition between feudalism and capitalism" (p. 220).

Exciting as Malcolmson's central textual argument is as detective work, her interpretation involves her in some paradoxes, if not contradictions. At times she seems to want things both ways: sometimes she speaks as if the B manuscript makes a clean break with "The Church-porch" and its godly young man on the make, while at other times she speaks of the difference as more a matter of degree (p. 99); relatedly, the anti-careerism of "Affliction" (I), while arguably foregrounded by its placement in B, was already present in the more careerist W; and "The Church-porch," with its prudential ethic and proverbial stress on "profit," is not cut from the revised B but rather still inaugurates it. And speaking of proverbs, it is surprising that the theologically-aware Malcolmson largely overlooks what Lewalski and Bloch found so crucial for Herbert: Biblical form and style. Malcolm- son does not seem to consider the pervasive formal and tonal influence of the Proverbs and Psalms. Yet the contrasting voices of Solomon and David—of prudent piety and abandoned devotion—echo throughout these two segments of The Temple; how much, we may ask, does the turn from one to the other show a diachronic transformation in the society and the poet, and how much a synchronic emulation of the scriptures?

This neglect of Biblical precedents is especially striking where they would complicate or weaken Malcolmson's claims about the uniqueness of Herbert's historical moment. Invoking Raymond Williams, she describes the intrinsic contradiction of the Protestant ethic—"the requirement to work industriously and the demand to stay in one's social place"—as produced by disintegrating English feudalism (p. 14). Yet this same "contradiction" is found, long before and far away, in St. Paul's exhortations to diligent labor on the one hand and to contentment with one's given social rank on the other (I Cor. 7: 15-24). This Pauline "contradiction" certainly pre-exists and to some degree determines the Herbertian moment in early Stuart England.

Yet, despite such lapses in the consistency of her argument, *Heart-Work* remains a textually, biographically, and pedigogically indispensible study. For those of us who always feel a touch of anti-climax when our syllabi leave the thrilling cataracts of Donne for the stiller waters of Herbert, Cristina Malcolmson has mapped a fresh course through the falls, twists, and turnings of his inner and outer lives.