

Theory and Theology in George Herbert's Poetry: 'Divinitie, and Poesie, Met.' By Elizabeth Clarke. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997. ISBN 0-19- 826398-8. Pp. 299. \$75*00.

By: Christopher Hodgkins

C. Hodgkins (1999). Elizabeth Clarke, *Theory and Theology in George Herbert's Poetry: "Divinitie and Poesie, Met."* *Christianity and Literature* 48(3): 371-74.

Made available courtesy of Conference on Christianity and Literature: <http://www.pepperdine.edu/sponsored/ccl/>

*****Reprinted with permission. No further reproduction is authorized without written permission from Conference on Christianity and Literature. This version of the document is not the version of record. Figures and/or pictures may be missing from this format of the document.*****

Article:

Since the publication a generation ago of Joseph H. Summers' *George Herbert, His Religion and Art* (1954), the essential lineaments of Herbert's Protestant faith have been clear, and since Barbara K. Lewalski's *Protestant Poetics and the Seventeenth-Century Religious Lyric* (1979) a growing consensus has emerged about the existence of an authentic Reformation poetic tradition and about Herbert as its master. Richard Strier in *Love Known: Theology and Experience in George Herbert's Poetry* (1983), Gene Edward Veith in *Reformation Spirituality: The Religion of George Herbert* (1985), the present writer in *Authority, Church, and Society in George Herbert: Return to the Middle Way* (1993) and Daniel W. Doerksen in *Conforming to the Word: Herbert, Donne, and the English Church before Laud* (1997) have all in varying ways complicated or erased the supposedly bright line between "Anglican" and "Puritan" in early Stuart religion, discovering the Lutheran-Calvinist common ground where conformists and nonconformists often met. These critics have, in turn, gone far to explain how a reputedly antiaesthetic Protestant biblicism could produce some of the most indestructibly beautiful poems in the language. While some dissenting "anti-Calvinist" voices remain, most particularly those of Stanley Stewart and John Wall, most new studies of Herbert now seem to assume an essentially Calvinist theology for the poet.

Elizabeth Clarke's *Theory and Theology in George Herbert's Poetry: 'Divinitie, and Poesie, Met.'* part of the Oxford Theological Monographs series, clearly begins with such an assumption. Her introduction announces that, within the early Stuart spectrum of "radical Puritans, moderate Puritans, conformist Calvinists, and anti-Calvinists," she will "situate Herbert firmly in the third category." Herbert's love of "decency," "order," Church authority, and "uniformity" mark him as conformist, "and I shall argue strongly... that he is unambiguously Calvinist in his doctrine and spirituality" (10). The most telling word in that previous sentence is "and." Clarke, like the above-mentioned critics, sees no necessary conflict between Reformed Catholic liturgy and Genevan divinity.

While Clarke both acknowledges and adds her voice to this Herbertian Calvinist consensus, she rightly sees much unfinished business arising from the concord. Specifically, if Herbert was so "unambiguously Calvinist," how does he speak God's Word in poetry, a medium maligned by many of his fellow Calvinists? And how do we account for Herbert's relationship to three earlier Roman Catholic devotional writers and sometime poets: the Florentine monk Girolamo Savonarola, the Genevan Counter-Reformation bishop St. François de Sales, and the Spanish humanist Juan de Valdés?

It is Herbert's complex interplay with the literary remains of these three men that provides the structure and much of the substance for Clarke's book. What Herbert wonderingly says of Valdés reveals Herbert's strongest point of contact across the Protestant-Catholic divide: that even "in the midst of Popery" God had opened Valdés' eyes to "the intent of the Gospell" (181). That religious Others could turn out to be kindred spirits Herbert found moving evidence of a universal divine providence. So Clarke observes Herbert's resemblances and responses to this trio and his differences from them. By doing so, she proposes to explain how he succeeded in creating a new kind of sanctified and sanctifying poetry, and—so she claims—how he failed as well. Ironically, while Clarke largely succeeds in accounting theologically and aesthetically for Herbert's success, she fails at explaining—or even adequately demonstrating—his failure.

One of the pleasures of Clarke's book for the theologically minded reader is its unashamed interest in and fluency with "divinity." Rather than seeking to apologize for or explain away the doctrinal matrices that nurtured Herbert's poetry, she quite reasonably assumes that "theology," both experiential and propositional, was of the essence to the man and his times and that theological language does not reduce easily to other terms. Indeed, she writes that "there is no discourse of literary theory separate from that of theology in the early seventeenth century" (24). So while Clarke does make use of some contemporary critical theory, with mixed results, the "theory" announced in her title is not mainly post- but rather early-modern, as she turns to Herbert's English predecessors and contemporaries—especially Savonarola, de Sales, and Valdés—to explain what the poet thought and felt that he was doing with words.

Thus Clarke begins by accounting for Herbert's poetic vocation not as a New Historicist critic like Michael Schoenfeldt does, in terms of courtly strategies for gaining access to power, but rather as Sir Philip Sidney does in *A Defence of Poesy*: she argues that Herbert stepped consciously into the role of "right poet," the "maker." He seeks not to achieve the "vatic" voice of epic seer but rather to adopt and adapt the traditionally profane voice of the lyric—songs, "sonnets," and "lays"—in order to redeem it and its readers for the love of Christ (6).

Having shown in her introduction, "Poetry and Divine Motion," how Herbert was moved early on to take up Sidney's call, and with it the mantle of Christian lyric poet, Clarke then turns to the triad of continental Catholic writers who provide analogues for Herbert's poetic vocation and who in at least one case—Savonarola's—helped Herbert to theorize and justify it. Significantly Clarke notes that by Herbert's time both Savonarola and Valdés enjoyed the posthumous distinction of being considered "honorary [Protestants]" by the Reformed community in both Europe and England. In her first chapter, "Herbert and Savonarola: The Rhetoric of Radical Simplicity," Clarke argues that the Florentine Benedictine endeared himself to the Bemerton parson not merely in being excommunicated and martyred by Rome, but mainly because he preached that "the Christian can experience intimate communion with God outside of the external ceremonies of the Church, beyond the scope of the office of the priesthood: in the holy place that is his heart" (27).

Thus Clarke very plausibly finds in Savonarola's Augustinian *De Simplicitate Christianae Vitae* (1496), which Herbert clearly knew, a model for Herbert's own aesthetic of inward spiritual simplicity, as famously expressed in "The Windows" and the two "Jordan" poems. As does Savonarola, these lyrics dismiss "speech alone" along with the "false hair" and "trim invention" of mere poetic ornament. Yet Clarke distinguishes crucially between Herbert and this proto-Protestant master: where Savonarola, in a Neoplatonic vein, envisages the holy preacher as a mere channel for God's Spirit, "who will pour forth into the world unmediated by reason or rhetoric[,]... Herbert's God seems to care about human [poetic and rhetorical] standards, and use[s] human means of communication" (53). In other words, for Herbert "God will intervene to supply the rhetorical elements necessary to write good poetry in human terms" (52). This divine redemption of natural means, rather than a rejection of them, is essential to Herbert's Reformed aesthetics.

Clarke's second chapter, comparing Herbert's *The Temple* to de Sales' *Introduction to the Devoute Life*, is unexceptionable in its argument and a good deal longer than the first. Yet the chapter is ironically the least substantial in the book because it contains the least critical news. By arguing, *contra* Louis Martz in *The Poetry of Meditation* (1962), that de Sales' "attitude to religious language ... is actually alien to Reformation spirituality, and to much of Herbert's poetic practice" (74), Clarke is essentially beating a dead horse, since this anti-Salesian case was ably made by Lewalski and Strier nearly two decades ago, and even Martz has since modified his views on the subject. Indeed, Clarke seems rather nervously aware of having been preceded in this line of argument, for she relegates mention of Lewalski's *Protestant Poetics* mainly to a few discursive footnotes. Nevertheless, Clarke does make a worthwhile new point here: she claims, quite plausibly, that the subtitle to *The Temple*, namely *Sacred Poems and Private Ejaculations*, is not actually Herbert's but rather a kind of marketing device, probably added posthumously by the printer to capitalize on the popularity of "ejaculatory" devotion—the poetry of spontaneous emotional outburst—in the early 1630s (125-26).

This discussion of "ejaculatory" prayer and poetry provides Clarke with a transition to her third chapter on Herbert's role as contemporary Psalmist. Here she builds again on the work of Lewalski, and of Chana Rloch in *Spelling the Word: George Herbert and the Bible* (1985), but in this case breaks important new ground by linking Herbert's poetic practice to the versified Psalms of sixteenth-century French Protestants Théodore de Rèze and Clement Marot. The "Marot-Rèze Psalter" was adopted by John Calvin for use in worship at Geneva and seems to have inspired Herbert's distant relatives Sir Philip Sidney and Mary Sidney Herbert, Countess of Pembroke, to versify the Psalms in English (130). Significantly, Clarke follows Helen Wilcox in arguing that, within decades of his death, Herbert had already achieved public status as a true sacred poet: his were among the first extra-biblical poems to be set to music and sung in English church services; the "sweet singer of *The Temple*" was now keeping company with David himself (177-78).

Clarke's fourth chapter, "Reading Herbert Reading Valdés," is her best because it is carefully evidenced, closely attentive to the chosen texts, and nicely nuanced. She explores the remarkable parallels—and the important divergences—between Herbert and a man who, more than a century before and in the drastically different cultural circumstances of Spanish and Italian humanism, had come to a faith strikingly like the Remerton parson's. Clarke argues persuasively that Herbert probably first read *The One Hundred and Ten Considerations* of "John Valdesso" very near the end of his life after being asked for his commentary by Nicholas Ferrar, whose Little Gidding community was producing an English edition. Thus Valdés cannot be seen as much of an influence on Herbert's poetry, which was by this time mostly written.

Yet the brief *Notes on Valdesso* that Herbert produced for Ferrar throwlight backward on all else that Herbert wrote because they are the closest thing to a prose theological treatise that we have from him. Happily, the *Notes* show him as both warmly charitable and carefully discerning. While praising and approving Valdés' Luther-like exaltation of faith and his accompanying assertion of absolute divine predestination, Herbert recoils from Valdés' antinomianism, his exaltation of personal illumination at the expense of Scripture, and his apparent rejection of all outward "means" of grace—including verbal means (222). Herbert's affectionate critique of Valdés, says Clarke, is disquietingly prophetic, as it anticipates and condemns the heterodoxies of Cromwellian illuminist Puritanism that, within twenty years, would help to fragment the older Calvinist consensus that Herbert had so hoped would revive and reunify the English Church (223).

Clarke's last chapter on Herbert and the sanctification of poetry is of a piece with her conclusion, but regrettably it veers away from the general trend of her argument toward some surprising and misleading judgments. Having repeatedly and rightly claimed throughout her book that Herbert rejects Neoplatonic dualism like Savonarola's and radical antinomian inwardness like Valdés', she turns in the end to assert that *The Temple* fails sadly as a model of spiritual progress because Herbert is never "allowed... to feel he has achieved anything in terms of personal holiness, or consistent relationship with God.... By the end... Herbert is no further forward than he was at the beginning: in the final lyric ['Love' (HI)] he has still to learn to be quiet, and to rest" (272). She puts aside without discussion the quite plausible reading that "the banquet being described is the heavenly one"—these last poems are, after all, about the Four Last Things—and instead chooses to read the repetitions and relapses of *The Temple* as a flat and ultimately vicious cycle, rather than as a redemptive spiral in which old sins and problems are revisited in progressively higher registers.

It is also rather disturbing that she seeks to give Herbert's great psalmic sequence a darker ending by relying on a "dark" poem like "Perseverance," one that Herbert finally *cut* from *The Temple*, probably for being too despairing—and possibly too Arminian as well. And most puzzling of all, given all of her earlier insistence that Herbert's Calvinism allows for the divine redemption of natural and human means, she reverts in the end, like Stanley Fish in *Self-Consuming Artifacts: The Experience of Seventeenth-Century Literature* (1972), to treating divine and human creation as locked in a mutually exclusive zero-sum game. Thus divine intervention utterly obliterates poetry, and the holiest poem is mere silence (276-80). Yes, there is much artful silence in Herbert's poetry, yet it is not the silence of resigned defeat or numb absence but of wondering and worshipful presence. Clarke's often excellent and valuable book deserves a happier, and a truer, end.