

**Cristina Malcolmson.** *Heart-Work: George Herbert and the Protestant Ethic.* Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press, 1999. 297 pp. \$45.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8047-2988-8.



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George Herbert (1593-1633) is known chiefly as the author of *The Temple*, a collection of exquisite devotional poetry, and *The Country Parson*, a prose manual of instruction for parish clergy. He is an enigmatic figure: an aristocrat and admired Cambridge orator who nonetheless at the age of 37 became the Anglican minister to a small, rustic living in Wiltshire. In his Restoration biography of the poet, Izaak Walton (1670) labeled his subject "Holy Mr. Herbert," but to post-modern critical readers the term cannot account for Herbert or his writings.

Now Cristina Malcolmson, Associate Professor of English at Bates College, applies strategies of New Historicism (Cultural Materialism) to offer astute, original readings of Herbert's texts within their contexts. Under Malcolmson's careful and well informed gaze, *The Country Parson* reveals itself to be an exercise in Renaissance self-fashioning, the character study of a gentleman consciously shaping himself for plain-style provincial holiness. Meanwhile, the carefully revised and polished *Temple* proves to be a complex, evolving portrait of the devout English Protestant, assert-

ing his social value not through birth or patronage but through vocation. To explain the controlling sub-text of Herbert's writings, Malcolmson evokes Max Weber's early 20th-century thesis that the Protestant ethic develops and displays virtue through work for the public good. She cites Herbert's "Elixir" (today one of 47 hymns of "Christian Responsibility" in the American Episcopal Church's *Hymnal 1982*):

Teach me, my God and King, In all things thee to see, And what I do in any thing, To do it as for thee: . . . A servant with this clause Makes drudgerie divine: Who sweeps a room, as for thy laws, Makes that and th'action fine.

Honest, helpful work deliberately enacted as an effort to please God is itself a manifestation of grace. Malcolmson's title quotes Richard Baxter, who in 1681 said of Herbert that "*Heart-work* and *Heaven-work* make up his Books." Herbert advances a social status based not on wealth or birth but on vocation.

The chief pleasure of sharing Malcolmson's readings of Herbert is the discovery of new ways to value familiar texts. For example, Malcolmson

brings the dialogue poem "Love" (p. 3) the last poem of the long central section of *The Temple*, into conversation with the early narrative sonnet "Redemption," which dramatizes a rural tenant's guilt at witnessing the death of his aristocratic lord the moment the lord grants the tenant's request. Reading the lord's welcome to his tenant in "Love" (p. 3) within the contexts of the earlier poem and of the Church of England's homily on the Eucharist, Malcolmson shows the lord's insistence that the tenant not kneel or serve but "sit and eat" is a specifically Protestant "conferral of grace as aristocratic largesse" (p. 177). The tenant ceases to be a servant and becomes a friend.

Malcolmson believes that Herbert's dramatic change of vocation from courtier to parson owed much to his patronage by his powerful kinsman William Herbert, the third Earl of Pembroke. Pembroke, a rigorous Protestant, who had stood out against the rising royal favorite, the Duke of Buckingham, who favored alliance with Catholic Spain. The resulting decline in Pembroke's influence diminished hopes for preferment of those associated with him, including George Herbert. Shortly before his own untimely death Pembroke persuaded King Charles to grant Herbert the ministry at Bemerton near his own estate of Wilton, and Herbert accepted.

The Pembroke connection, Malcolm asserts, also provided Herbert a lively first audience for his writings. Claiming its direct descent from Sir Philip Sidney (1554-1586) in politics as well as genealogy, the Pembroke coterie placed Herbert in company with Donne, Shakespeare, and William Herbert himself. Thus Malcolmson reads Herbert's poems as answers to specific works and themes shared by the Sidney-Herbert circle. His shaped poem "The Altar," for example, imitates altar-shaped poems that dedicated books to Pembroke, but Herbert asserts his independence by dedicating his "Altar," to God. Sir Philip Sidney's *Apology for Poetry* had placed religion highest among literary themes, but his sonnet sequence

*Astrophil and Stella* had portrayed sexual desire instead; Herbert answers Sidney with sonnets dedicated solely to God. Even Herbert's extensive imagery of cultivation, replete with planting, pruning, and mysterious fluorescence, to Malcolmson reflects gardening experiments at Wilton.

In imitation Herbert shows himself a better poet than his patron. William Herbert's "Soules Joy," like John Donne's "Valediction: Forbidding Mourning," speaks of the spiritual connection between lovers separated by distance: "Soules joy, now I am gone, / And you alone, / (Which cannot be, / Since I must leave my selfe with thee / And carry thee with me)." In "A Parodie," Herbert's speaker is the soul speaking to God: "Souls joy, when thou art gone, / And I alone, / Which cannot be, / Because thou dost abide with me, / And I depend on thee." As Malcolmson touchingly points out, Herbert alone takes the woman's traditional role, the voice of the lover left behind.

Malcolmson's scholarship is both thorough and courteous. She acknowledges the influence of Stephen Greenblatt and New Historicism, of Richard Strier's decisively Protestant historicist answer to wistful old claims for Herbert as a High Church Anglo-Catholic, and of Jeffrey Powers-Beck's very recent attention to Herbert's place within his family. Gratifyingly, she also acknowledges the continuing value of earlier Herbert readers including Joseph Summers, who in 1954 connected Herbert's religion and art, and Rosemund Tuve, who in 1950 introduced contextual analysis to defy a heavily Freudian mis-reading of Herbert.

Malcolmson's confidence in asserting her surmises as if they were nearly indisputable facts results in a pleasing prose style that nonetheless conceals all room for doubt. Because without independent verification she dates specific textual revisions from events in Herbert's life, her biographical interpretation of those revisions depends on circular reasoning. She never considers

the likely possibility that Herbert admired the courtier and the parson simultaneously rather than pursuing a conscious plan to revise himself from one to the other. In proclaiming the third Earl of Pembroke the political heir to Sidney, Leicester, and Essex, she ignores other courtiers who held equal claims. These quibbles aside, *Heart-Work* is a rewarding study of George Herbert in the contexts of his rich literary history.

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