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Donne's Visual Culture

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Ann Hollinshead Hurley, *John Donne's Poetry and Early Modern Visual Culture*, Selinsgrove: Susquehanna University Press, 2005. 248 pp.

This is the first book-length study that engages selected secular and devotional poetry by Donne in the broad context of early modern visual culture. Ann Hollinshead Hurley subsumes visual art under visual culture, for the latter term more aptly designates the expansive concept that informs her study. Whereas visual art refers to artifacts, Hurley broadens her investigation by encompassing visual images of various kinds (not merely artifacts such as paintings, sculptures, and architecture) that were integrated into popular activity, events at court, and academic life. Among the more popular visual images were the following: church windows, religious rituals, seasonal celebrations, processions, local festivals, games of courtship in the country, and pageantry. Courtly images involved royal progresses, masques, and various dramatic entertainments and spectacles. Visual images from academic life included illuminations in manuscripts, frontispieces of books, maps, emblem books, and theatrical performances. For Hurley, such a rich social context provides an effective means to explicate Donne's poetry.

Hurley stresses, however, that her methodology is not aimed at identifying "source and influence." Nor is her methodology to be confused with the approach of art historians, who focus less on visual culture and more on visual art from aesthetic and stylistic perspectives. Rather, Hurley aligns her method with that of the New Historicism, which enriches our understanding of literary works in at least two ways: by immersing them in the cultural, political, and religious currents and cross-currents of society, and by interrelating them with texts not

typically associated with literature. In Hurley's New Historicist undertaking, the texts interrelated with Donne's poetry are visual images and activities, which, she persuasively contends, exemplify the social milieu and its attendant cultural, political, and religious forces. As a corollary to this argument, she posits that the manner by which Donne verbally engages and appropriates visual culture reflects his own positions on many of the controversies of late sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century England.

Incorporated into her analysis is ongoing reference to Donne's ambivalent attitude toward visual images generally. Born and reared a Roman Catholic, Donne gravitated toward visual images and developed an attitude of iconophilia. But in his adulthood as a priest in the Church of England, Donne, like many Protestants, exhibited a distrust of visual images, an attitude of iconophobia. His tendency as a poet to employ visual images may have conflicted with his Reformed religious scruples and with his awareness of the political implications of manifesting Catholic sympathies in militantly Protestant England. Because this anxiety may have informed how Donne appropriates and deploys elements of visual culture in his poetry, Hurley adroitly incorporates psychobiographical speculation in her sensitive readings of the poems. Beginning with a Preface that outlines her New Historicist method, Hurley then organizes her study into five chapters, each citing and expounding different elements of the visual culture, which she then interrelates with close readings of selected poems by Donne.

In the first chapter, "Donne and Painting: The Early Politics," Hurley reexamines the Lothian portrait, the self-image commissioned by Donne in the 1590s. Rather than focusing on this self-image of Donne as the stereotyped melancholic lover, Hurley investigates the crossed-arms pose in the Lothian portrait from another perspective. She likens the pose to that of angels, of saints, and of exceptionally militant members of the ecclesiastical hierarchy. Such depictions, relatively commonplace, range across the fourteenth, fifteenth, and sixteenth centuries. They began in Italy, but eventually appeared in France, Bavaria, and England. Hurley, in fact, argues that Donne's cross-arms pose issues from this Catholic visual tradition, which contrasts with the well-known verbal tradition of the melancholic lover portrayed in Robert Burton's *Anatomy of Melancholy* and in numerous sonnets of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. More subtly, she asserts that by using the same pose for dual

purposes—to disclose his Roman Catholic sentiment but to disguise it under the image of the melancholic lover—Donne wittily capitalizes on the verbal tradition as a safeguard against political reprisal. Extending this view of Donne's wit as a means by which the poet simultaneously reveals and conceals, Hurley focuses on "Satire 4," a poem with multifarious visual images, many performative, that Donne wittily deploys in verbal maneuvers of revelation and concealment. Accordingly, Hurley discerns how Donne intuits that the government, despite its seeming iconophobia, was assimilating Catholic images, liturgy, and ceremonies to secular use. As a young man, Donne himself, with recusant sympathies, may have experienced the tensions of a manipulated victim, one who wishes to be loyal to the government while he acknowledges that visual elements of his Catholic religion were being accommodated to political purposes. Concluding the chapter is an excellent comparative study of Donne's elegy "His Picture" and Nicholas Hilliard's *Arte of Limning* (*c.* 1600) on the topic of material representation of one's inner being.

The second chapter focuses on the performative elements of festival and ceremony, both courtly and popular, and their implications for understanding a notable feature of Donne's poetry, namely intervention or interruption. This feature plays into a broader trend in Donne's poetry that often combines dramatic immediacy, witty reversals, and abrupt changes in tone and argument to generate surprise and amusement. To develop a social context for her analysis of the poetry, Hurley dwells on royal entertainments that highlight Elizabeth I's visual and verbal interruptions and on student revels at Inns of Court. Examining, in turn, intervention or interruption as a rhetorical figure, Hurley cites George Puttenham's *Arte of English Poesie* (1589) and its discussion of *aposiopesis*, the figure of silence or of interruption. In his discussion, Puttenham correlates the explanation of the rhetorical figure with performative analogues. In the visual culture that she has recounted, Hurley situates Donne's "The Flea," which is a prime example of a dramatic lyric with an interruptive gesture that is pivotal in the speaker's argument. But additional poems, notably the "Canonization" and "The Sun Rising," begin with interruption; others like "Woman's Constancy" and "Go and Catche a Falling Starre" achieve reversals at the end, not by actual interruption but by anticipating how a second voice would intervene; still

others like "A Nocturnall upon S. Lucies Day" depict interrupted processes of thinking.

In the third chapter, Hurley explains how the city of London itself epitomizes the visual culture that informs several of Donne's poems. In the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, the city was changing into an international business community, in which the mercantilism, conspicuous excess, and extraordinary consumption of civic leaders emerged. The pageantry under the aegis of the Lord Mayor of London rivaled royal processions and progresses, for the economic resources and political influence in the city were controlled by the civic elite. Donne's Elegy 18, "Loves Progress," features a consumer, not a courtier, as its speaker. Desire and acquisitive impulses inform his perception, and materialistic and erotic forms of lust are juxtaposed in a series of proliferating images: warfare, voyaging along routes of trade, and cartography, all suggesting that consumerism is aroused constantly but never fully satisfied. Hurley pursues variations of this stress on materialism in other poems by Donne, such as the "Obsequies" for the Lord Harrington and "Hymne to God My God in my Sicknesse," works in which book production and illustration, maps, engravings, and frontispieces integrate the major components of a print culture with the visual culture.

The fourth chapter centers on multiple attitudes toward religious art and images in Donne's era. Striving to achieve the *via media* between Catholic iconophilia and Reformed iconophobia, Donne identifies at least two purposes in the use of visual images: they are external manifestations of the devotional mind, and they are means to facilitate humankind's encounter with the godhead. Probably the finest example of the two purposes being fulfilled is "The Crosse," a poem in which material images promote devotion and relentlessly lead the speaker and the reader to meditate on the omnipresence of God. A more sophisticated treatment of the import of visual images occurs in "Good Friday, 1613. Riding Westward," which is informed by illustrated meditative practices or devotional exercises issuing from the mind's engagement of real images. In Donne's poem, however, the speaker's remembrance of real images activates his imagination so that the poem becomes a dynamic process of unfolding meditation with affective and edifying consequences.

The fifth chapter centers upon practices of collecting visual images in Donne's era and exhibiting them in so-called "cabinets" of curiosities and of antiquities. Later in his life, Donne collected paintings, many with religious themes. Surveying the practices of royalty and nobility in the sixteenth century, Hurley traces how the collecting of visual images manifested the gradual refinement of aesthetic sensibility and taste. These upper social classes developed a discourse to accompany their practices of acquisition, appraisal, and connoisseurship. Situating selected verse letters by Donne in this context, Hurley interprets them not as typical poems of patronage but as commentaries on connoisseurship of art. By citing the nobility who were collectors and connoisseurs, men and women alike, whom Donne knew, Hurley enriches our understanding of Donne's "coterie" and of the interests fostered among its members. Among other poems cited in this chapter, the holy sonnet "Spit in my face" becomes a focal point for dramatizing the transition from collecting to becoming a connoisseur of art. Donne's manipulation of the gaze of the reader of the poem and his negotiation of the biblical narrative of Jacob and Esau manifest his cultural conditioning to appraise visual images and his cultivated understanding of their significance.

Hurley's study is well-argued overall. Parts of the first four chapters appeared in multiauthor collections or journals. Incorporated here, and supplemented by new material, they achieve remarkable unity and coherence not merely to justify the monograph but to promote insights beyond the capability of individual essays to do so. Attentive to the unity and coherence of her monograph, Hurley has added transitional paragraphs that remind the reader of the overall thesis and of the function served by a particular chapter in the grand design of the book. What seems odd, however, is that the book includes no illustrations. For a work that centers upon visual culture and its implications for interpreting the verbal art of Donne's poetry, selected illustrations would have been useful to the reader. In discussing "Spit in my face," for instance, Hurley in an endnote cites one visual image of the story of Jacob and Esau, Ghiberti's bronze doors to the baptistry of Florence (*c.* 1435). That one panel, however, features six scenes, four of which involve Rebekah, the wife of Isaac and mother of Jacob and Esau. But Rebekah is not mentioned in Hurley's analysis of Donne's holy sonnet. Also unmentioned is the scene in which Esau foolishly bargains away his birthright to Jacob in exchange for pottage. The foregoing elements of

the story of Jacob and Esau and their significance would enhance Hurley's already insightful study of Donne's sonnet. Finally, the book has some misprints, such as "cognoscente" for "cognoscenti" (p. 40) and "semifactiously" for "semifacetiously" (p. 149). Such minor concerns, however, do not detract from the general excellence of the book.

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