

Reading Ritual

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Achsah Guibbory. *Ceremony and Community from Herbert to Milton: Literature, Religion, and Cultural Conflict in Seventeenth-Century England*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998.

This book is a welcome addition to recent discussions of its wide-ranging topics. Noting that religion has come to be “understood in terms of power politics, when it has not been discarded as an outmoded, uninteresting subject of inquiry,” Professor Guibbory wishes “to argue for a new attention to the function of religion in seventeenth-century England, where religious beliefs, values, and institutions were interwoven with most aspects of society and experience” (p. 2). We seem indeed a long way from the days when Helen White could discuss seventeenth-century poetry almost exclusively in religious terms, but this book brings many of those issues to bear, in a seemingly effortless way, on contemporary critical discussions.

Guibbory’s intention in the book is to show how both “an anti-ritual or a ritualist ideology . . . could be variously empowering and repressive” (p. 3), and this balance she largely successfully achieves. As criticism of late has emphasized the Laudian repressiveness of high-Church Anglicanism (an anachronism I will use in this review), her insistence—which might have been commonplace a generation or two ago and which was most certainly so in the Renaissance (“Dost thou think because thou art virtuous there shall be no more cakes and ale?”)—that Puritanism could be no less repressive is especially welcome. “Puritan” she refers to consistently in its most basic sense as

consisting of those who not only may have embraced Calvinist theology but who even more fundamentally desired a “worship purified of supposedly idolatrous ceremonies” (p. 5). In the puritan mentality, she argues, “all experience—not just religious worship—tends to be interpreted in terms of binary patterns that emphasize conflict rather than harmony and continuity” (pp. 37-8).

It is, indeed, in those chapters that emphasize “harmony and continuity” that the book’s argument is most successful. Concerning Robert Herrick’s *Hesperides*, for example, Guibbory says that “we cannot neatly divide the sacred from the secular, the Christian from the pagan or Jewish” (p. 85), and her entire discussion of Herrick is quite lucid on the point. In its “complex interminglings of Christian and classical” and in its “mixed” religion, *Hesperides* is a poetic counterpart of the Laudian church (p. 88) which, she persuasively argues, is no bad thing. “The very conjunction of the sensual and devotional, the erotic and the reverent,” as she says towards the end of her discussion of Herrick, “reenacts the ceremonialist sense of interconnection and harmony between body and spirit” (p. 115). Pointing out that Herrick wrote his poetry during the heyday of the puritan attack on ceremony and ritual, Guibbory makes a strong case for Herrick as a poet of some courage and vigor not afraid to fight against the prevailing cultural tide.

She also stands up for Sir Thomas Browne’s work as something more than reinforcing the ideas of the conservative elite: “At its most generous, Browne’s universalism not only includes but tolerates differences, with a willingness to try out alternative, alien experiences”; this results in a collapsing of “boundaries in a way that subverts Laudian rigor, intimating a more tolerant spirit” (p. 129). Browne was indeed a ceremonialist but one for whom, in a work such *Urn Buriall*, ritual and ceremony had only human significance: “As human art, ceremony can only, with more or less elegance, express human desire” (p. 140). With a statement such as this, the centuries seem to fall away, as it expresses the attitude of many in the year 2000 about ceremony and tradition as well.

This book would not be as good as it is if it did not invite debate and dissent. Despite her declared intentions, Professor Guibbory does not

employ, on the whole, terms such as “religion” and “theology” but prefers to approach her subject through terms such as “ceremony,” “ritual,” and “ideology.” Although her aim is indeed to bring religion back into the forefront of critical awareness, she still, in her discussions of individual authors, uses “ideology” a great deal to denote differences between puritan and Anglican. This of course is a term which gained currency in the rise of the secular philosophies of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and was used to distinguish them from any ways of thought which made crucial the supernatural. Nowadays the term is being extended backwards to the Renaissance, implying (I do not of course suggest that this is what Guibbory intends) that arguments over Reformation theologies were nothing more than projections of human opinions and subjective beliefs. Certainly the participants in these arguments had few such notions; many of them, and their ancestors, had been willing and joyful martyrs for religion, but there have been relatively few such martyrs for ideology—although it has indeed made many unwilling martyrs.

Her focus on “ideology,” then, makes her chapter on Herbert a little more complicated than it needs to be. It contains, to be sure, the easy, interesting, and informed reading of particular poems and works that is the hallmark of this book. But she is perhaps overly concerned to place Herbert midway between the claims of his high church and puritan champions, respectively. While “Sion” is indeed a contrast between Jewish ceremonial worship and the Christian interior worship of the heart, as she says, it is not necessarily the case, as her argument also suggests, that Herbert is rejecting seventeenth-century liturgical forms and architecture. His concern with the restoration of the church at Bemerton suggests he does not see an attractive church building as antithetical to the religious impulse. Indeed, traditional Christian religion always tries to make sense of the human conflict between material and spiritual, the former seen as conducive to the latter. It is this characteristic tension that Herbert portrays over and again in the poetry and an historicist perspective that sees him mainly trying to adjudicate between ceremonialist and puritan positions reduces his universality. In the Old Testament God both enjoins external sacrifices and affirms that

such sacrifices can never satisfy the demands of the spirit—can He not make up his mind? Christ says to do everything that the priests demand but not to behave as they do—a contradiction? Thomas Aquinas received a vision at the end of his life which, he said, made everything that he had written to that point seem “as straw”—a late puritan impulse on the part of the saint? In each of these cases material values are commanded or affirmed but are also shown to be inadequate—not contradictions but paradoxes required by the dual nature of man, a being “darkly wise and rudely great,” flawed by nature and perfectible by Grace. That is, it is only by performing sacrifices that one realizes they are insufficient; if they are never performed, that deeper religion which the prophets commend is never glimpsed. St. Thomas’s vision would have been meaningless had his material accomplishments been minimal; because they were vast, his vision takes on added grandeur. Herbert’s interior groans take on added weight perhaps because of the very splendor of the Jewish temple which has had to be abandoned, in the manner that St. Paul’s great sins spurred him on—after a profound conversion, to be sure—to accomplish a great deal more than one would have expected from the “least of the Apostles.”

Guibbory is certainly not one-sided in her discussion of Herbert. She recognizes, for example, that “his attitude is more complex than those who see only his ‘radical devaluations of poetry’ admit” (p. 65). She has many fine readings of poems which note the proper tension between material and spiritual, but her arguments are somewhat diluted by seeking to place Herbert in the ceremonialist or puritan categories that she is insisting on for the poets she discusses. Thus, she says “An indeterminate meaning . . . inheres in ‘The Windows’” (p. 71). But surely Herbert is doing no more than insisting in that poem what traditional Christianity always insisted upon: doctrine and life are both necessary, external observance and internal life both required. Partisans of one camp or another may emphasize one aspect or another but surely the poem speaks in simple and clear terms. Complexity enters the picture only when we as critics demand that Herbert conform to a pattern that we have devised for him. Or to take the “Jordan” poems: it is of course true that there is in “love a sweetness ready penned” and

that one should “copy only that and save expense.” But such simple conclusions are reached only through a poem of some artistic intricacy—as Guibbory says (p. 62). So perhaps my disagreement with her is no more than her saying that Herbert’s poetry has “contradictory impulses” (p. 78) whereas it seems to me that he is doing no more than giving due attention to those material and spiritual elements that always must be noticed in human beings dealing with the divine. Surely he was not as much concerned with wearing the right ideological label as with becoming a new creature. For the historicist only the former is possible; but for the religious, and Herbert was certainly this, something more is required.

The two final chapters of the book concern Milton. Historicist issues are again very much to the fore in this discussion, with the virtues and limitations of this method. Guibbory does an excellent job of discussing Milton’s prose tracts, relating them frequently to issues in the poetry and using them to establish her thesis that “Milton identifies the carnal with the pagan, the Catholic, and the Jewish, all of which were believed to share an essential carnality incompatible with the spiritual worship enjoined by Christ” (p. 153). She seeks to “historicize the religious preoccupations” (p. 157) of *Comus*; the enchanter’s temptations “are not simply to intemperance and revelry, but to idolatry, to a false religion identified with carnality, paganism, and Catholicism” (p. 158). All very likely—but again I would say that it is to more general issues—those of chastity and its connection to contemplation, of a nature to be used or praised and enjoyed (in the Augustinian sense), of whether or not “virtue could see to do what virtue would/ By her own radiant light, though sun and moon/ Were in the flat sea sunk”—that the masque has owed its vitality in this century and to which it will continue to owe its vitality.

The book’s last chapter is largely devoted to *Paradise Lost*, a poem not especially conducive to historicizing, and Guibbory is an honest enough writer to acknowledge this in several places, especially concerning the ceremonial praise which Adam and Eve offer in the Garden each morning, in the heavenly praises the angels offer to God and, especially, in the Edenic nuptial rites. Here, though, she claims that

“Christianity from its inception diverged from the Jewish emphasis on marriage and sexuality as divinely created, necessary, and good” (p. 208). This is surely not true. From the beginning Christianity made marriage a sacrament, supported by St. Paul’s assertion that the union of man and woman imaged that between Christ and the Church. What greater argument could a Christian make about the goodness of marriage and sexuality? Further, St. Augustine, from whom Christian suspicion of sexuality is so often said to derive, did not deny the goodness of prelapsarian lovemaking—how else was the injunction to be fruitful and multiply to be fulfilled?—but rather said that the Fall resulted in sex being removed from the rational control of the will—a defensible position, to say the least. And, finally, opposition to Christianity in the early centuries came largely from the Gnostic heresies, opposed to the new religion’s emphasis on the goodness of the body and material creation.

Professor Guibbory has gotten us back in this book to thinking about those issues which the authors of the seventeenth century were most concerned about. Helen White once said that persons of that age were as conversant about great theological issues as is a modern person about Hollywood celebrities. If Guibbory has granted too much ground to the vocabulary and basically secularist outlook of the new historicism, it is undoubtedly a result of her own genial tolerance, always on display in this book, along with wide and informed reading and a literary style never less than answerable to the points she wishes to make.

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