

Sacramental Poetics in an Age of Controversy

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Literature and Sacrament: The Sacred and the Secular in John Donne. Theresa M. DiPasquale. Pittsburgh: Duquesne Univ. Press, 1999. Pp. xviii + 338.

Theresa DiPasquale has written a valuable book on Donne's "sacramental" poetics, adding to our understanding of the ways in which early modern literature, even in its seemingly secular forms, was deeply engaged with religion. Other scholars have written on Donne's witty use of the controversial language of the Sacrament in his lyric poetry, or on Donne's way of turning sexual love into a sacrament but this is the first study to show the importance of the Sacrament to a wide range of Donne's writing and to place his poetry's sacramental theology in the Reformation context.

The thesis of this book is that Reformation notions of the Sacrament shape Donne's understanding of his writing as a "visible sign," of his priestly role as a poet communicating grace in a written text, and of his sense of the reader's importance as the "receiver" of his text, with an active role in determining its meaning and effect. In DiPasquale's hands, Donne's literary texts (letters, sermons, but especially the poems) become like the elements of the Eucharist, embodying and conveying something powerful, sacred, and potentially transformative—and offering it to worthy, appropriately receptive readers. Donne, ever self-conscious of the element of pride, may play with and deprecate his sacramental roles and power as a poet—or the worth of his text (particularly in verse letters to patrons)—yet DiPasquale shows how he takes this role seriously, how it explains his

sense of the “exchange between author and reader” (5), and how it shapes his writing in virtually all genres.

To make her argument, she begins with poems that most explicitly and obviously make claims to a sacramental nature and function. Part I focuses on sacred poetry; Part II on secular, although she shows the boundaries of these categories are actually porous. Chapter 1 gives a reading of “The Crosse,” in which Donne confronts Puritan objections in order to argue for the sacramentality of crosses. She reads this poem not only as revealing Donne’s understanding of the sacrament, but as showing how Donne turns the poem itself into a “sacramentally efficacious inscription” (34). Chapter 2, on *La Corona*, shows how Donne’s language, drawing on “the structure and language of the English communion rite” (68), turns the poem into a sacramental “offering to God” (61) that is also offered to the readers (91). She then moves from the obviously “sacred” poems to the more “secular,” showing how they too are based on a sacramental theology. Chapter 3, on the spiritual dangers of sacramental art, gives readings of the holy sonnet “I am a little world” and “Goodfriday, 1613. Riding Westward.” DiPasquale’s discussion here of Donne’s relation to the Petrarchan sonnet and of the idolatrous potential of the artfully carved sonnet of Petrarchan poetry is excellent, as is her explanation of why the sonnet was “a problematic form for post-Reformation English poets” (101). There is a fine discussion of Donne’s holy sonnets in relation to Sidney’s *Astrophil and Stella*. Her reading of “Goodfriday, 1613,” as actually a sequence of three sonnets ending in what she sees as a declaration of spiritual presumption and failure, is one of the best sections of the book. Chapters 4 and 5 focus on certain “anti-Petrarchan” poems (“Aire and Angels,” a verse letter to the Countess of Huntington, “Loves Deitie,” “The Funerall” and “Twicknam Garden”). Her readings of these poems identify the Petrarchan with the Catholic—“Loves Deitie” abjures “Petrarchan frustration, which is troped in the poem as love’s Papistry” (155); the speakers of Donne’s ironic “The Funerall” and “Twicknam Garden” are supposedly Jesuits—and thus suggest Donne’s anti-Catholic position in what are, as she nevertheless admits, religiously complicated, and ambiguous poems. Chapter 6 reads “The Flea” as “prophane Eucharist” (173) that makes ambivalent use of Catholic and reformed language in the goal of sexual intercourse and literary pleasure, both of which, she

argues, are successfully attained by the end. Chapter 7 focuses on two verse letters to male friends (the personal letter is “a truly sacramental genre,” 187), “A Jeat Ring Sent,” and “A Valediction forbidding mourning”—neatly pairing these last two poems as “rings” with sacramental significance. The final chapter, “Equivocal Devotion,” connects anxieties about conflicting loyalties in religion to conflicts over serving two women patrons, as it analyzes two of Donne’s verse letters to women: the unfinished “To the Countess of Bedford. Begun in France but never perfected” (an incomplete, imperfect confession), and “Man to Gods image” addressed to the Countess of Huntington, which DiPasquale reads in complex relation to the prose letter to Goodyer in which Donne enclosed this poem.

This is a fine and interesting range of texts to which Theresa DiPasquale applies her skills as close reader, and her analyses of these poems are careful, astute, and insightful. Especially good are the readings of “Goodfriday” and “Valediction: Forbidding Mourning.” Covering an unusual range of Donne’s work, the book is broader in scope than many discussions of Donne. She discusses poems that usually receive little attention, and demonstrates convincingly the ways a sacramental concern shapes much of his poetry—from “La Corona” and the divine poems, to the anti-Petrarchan lyrics and his witty “secular” love poems, to the verse letters to patronesses. She offers illuminating conjunctions of the poetry and the later sermons, whose comments about the Sacrament provide excellent glosses, though I think there could be more recognition of the possibility that Donne’s “position” on the sacraments changed over time. There is a somewhat ahistorical tendency to see all of Donne’s writing as of a piece, and Donne’s understanding of the Sacrament unchanging.

Some of the pairings of texts in *Literature and Sacrament* are absolutely wonderful, and we come away with a richer understanding of the individual pieces. The discussion of the verse letter to the Countess of Huntington in relation to Donne’s prose letter to Henry Goodyer is particularly fascinating, as is the pairing of “A Jeat Ring” and “Valediction forbidding mourning.” I could have wished, however, for more discussion of Donne’s famous “mutual love poems,” the poems we so often read and teach. Perhaps DiPasquale avoided giving them full attention simply because there’s been much more written on the ways they combine the secular and sacred, but I was surprised

to find only the briefest mention of “Canonization,” “The Exstasie,” and “The Relique”—and nothing at all on the “Nocturnal Upon S. Lucies Day.” What happens to the sacramental in these poems, with their difficult, enigmatic, often problematic use of religious language, their complex, conflicted assessment of the experience of love? Moreover, what are we to make of poems like “Farewell to Love” or “Loves Alchemy?” Do they also partake of a sacramental theology, or do they simply stand outside of it?

Theresa DiPasquale claims to discuss Donne’s sacramental theology and poetics within the Reformation “debate” over the Eucharist, and yet, curiously, she avoids positioning or locating Donne in the debate. Indeed, she consciously blurs the Protestant/Catholic binary as she rejects the notion that the debates were “bipolar” (8), and she downplays the growing tensions in the English Church as she emphasizes a broadly ecumenical English faith (e.g., 197-98). Like Jeanne Shami (whom she generously cites), DiPasquale sees Donne as flexible and avoiding polemics, and thus, she implies, resisting any neat categorization. Her Donne is uncategorizable, “eclectically” drawing on the Protestant/Catholic debates (and debates within the English Church) but never taking sides as he forges his own “synthesis” (10). His statements in the sermons “often involve a richly eclectic synthesis of conflicting theologies” (9). If Donne “defies categorization” (17), so do his poems—hence she resists in her readings trying to define their “position.” This is surprising in her reading of “The Crosse,” since, as she admits, the poem tackles a topic that would seem to be particularly polemical. Indeed, although she sees Donne drawing an analogy between the priest’s making the sign of the cross in ritual gesture and the poet’s making “an artistic image of the cross in words” (32), she never addresses the possibility that this poem might suggest Donne’s Catholic learnings, particularly in its emphasis on the material, visible crucifix. Moreover, if the reader “makes” the meaning, it would be worth considering what this poem would look like to readers in the 1633 edition of Donne’s poems, when ceremonial issues were even more sharply divisive of England than they had been in 1608.

Like Judith Herz, she sees a slippery Donne, who “refuses to settle” (17), but DiPasquale does not confront the possibility that such slipperiness and equivocation may be a mark of a recusant

temper, the strategy of the religiously persecuted, as Perez Zagorin has suggested in *Ways of Lying*. Though she insists on the “definitive impact of his religious experience as a Catholic who became a Protestant” (2), that is not in fact the object of her attention as she discerns Catholic and Protestant threads in the poems. Moreover, though she positions herself against M. Thomas Hester’s reading of a “recusant” Donne, DiPasquale actually avoids directly raising the question of whether there might be a polemical edge to Donne’s sacramental poetics, or his use of religious and “recusant” (as Hester would say) language in his poetry. Often, I found myself wanting her to push further in asking what purposes his witty religious, sacramental language might serve within a larger context that the poem and its immediate addressee or occasion provide. Indeed, for all her insistence that she’s discussing Donne’s sacramental poetics within the Reformation “debate,” she actually has surprisingly little interest in the fierceness of the debates, or in explaining what was at stake or analyzing more fully what it meant for Donne to use this admittedly controversial language in his poem. While Hester has been arguing for a “recusant” poetics, DiPasquale actually seems to me, in avoiding the politics of religion, to stop short of where some of her material might take her.

This book is full of learning, wit, and grace, but DiPasquale’s interest in theology and poetry is not as sharply historicist as the introduction might lead one to expect. Perhaps I am unfairly imposing my own methodological preferences, but I often wished she’d push further on what Donne’s sacramental wit might mean in the years of controversy not only between Catholics and Protestants (whom she rightly notes were diverse in their views) but also between Protestants within the Church of England. Moreover, although she is properly sensitive to the complexity of Donne’s religion and refuses to pigeonhole Donne, she implicitly presents him—throughout—as a “Protestant” poet with a Protestant theology of the Sacraments, dismissing or ignoring the possibility that he may not always have been so distinctly “Protestant.” Having rejected the widely held assumption that Protestant sacramental theology was “a theology of absence” (5), she sees Donne’s poetry—with its valuing of the elements of the Sacrament as “conveying” (if not “effecting”) grace—as much more firmly Protestant than Hester does in his reading of his “recusant”

poetics. She speaks of Donne's belief in the Sacrament—and his sacramental poetry—as “efficacious” (e.g., 34), as capable of “transforming” the reader/receiver (48), and yet is not the attribution of efficacy to Sacraments skirting dangerously close to a Catholic position? As she says in terms of the sacrament and Donne's sacramental poems, the readers ultimately will have to decide the meaning, what version of Donne they prefer.

Even if one disagrees with some of her assumptions or conclusions, there is so much to learn from this fine book. We now have a much better understanding of early modern thinking about the Sacrament as well as of the ways poetry can be sacramental. Her study of Donne's sacramental poetry complements Jeffrey Johnson's recent book on the theology of Donne's sermons. This fine book has done a great deal to illuminate Donne's wit. Particularly useful is her emphasis on a community of readers, her detailed discussion of the immediate audience of specific texts, and her argument that the ideal reader is like the receptive communicant. Very deeply read in the Reformation debates over the Eucharist, DiPasquale has brought that knowledge to bear on Donne's poems, which yield many new treasures to her skills as a close reader of texts. Her footnotes alone are invaluable as they offer a rich resource on the Reformation texts debating the Sacrament, and she concludes with an excellent, useful appendix on “The Doctrine of Eucharist Sacrifice,” which includes a carefully nuanced discussion of Donne's equivocal position in his late sermons, which seems quite close to Laud's sacramentalism, even if presented less confrontationally. With its attentive readings of poems, *Literature and Sacrament* makes important contributions to Donne studies, not the least of which is the suggestion that Donne, with his sense that his poetry might be “spiritually efficacious” (15), has, for all his real religious differences, something in common with the radically Protestant poet John Milton.

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