

## A Welcome Edition

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George Herbert, *Memoriae Matris Sacrum: To the Memory of My Mother: A Consecrated Gift: A Critical Text, Translation, and Commentary*, ed. Catherine Freis, Richard Freis, and Greg Miller, *George Herbert Journal* 33.1–2 (Fall 2009/Spring 2010). xx + 199pp.

This “Special Studies & Monographs” double issue of the *George Herbert Journal* is very special indeed. At a time when a working knowledge of foreign languages in general, but particularly of Latin and Greek, is much diminished among students of early modern literature, it is difficult to conceive of a more valuable and rewarding publication in the field than this careful edition of the Latin and Greek poems that George Herbert wrote in commemoration of his mother, Magdalene, Lady Danvers. In addition to scrupulously establishing the original text, Catherine Freis, Richard Freis, and Greg Miller have provided every imaginable aid for the comprehension of this remarkable yet neglected work. Surely, a scholarly version of a primary source such as this is worth a dozen or more of the typical monographs that continue to roll off the university presses in dismaying numbers.

*Memoriae Matris Sacrum* was first published along with John Donne’s “Sermon of Commemoration for the Lady Danvers” shortly after her death in 1627. Herbert’s work comprises nineteen poems, fourteen in Latin (1–13, 19) and five in Greek (14–18), ranging in length from six to sixty-five lines. The poems are skillfully constructed in a variety of classical meters, including elegiac couplets, dactylic hexameters, and various lyric stanzas. In the second appendix, “Herbert’s Metrics,” the editors identify the verse of each poem and show how the poet has

created a pattern among the poems by his arrangement of the various metrical forms.

Freis, Freis, and Miller have spared no effort to make these poems accessible to contemporary readers. An accurate, yet readable and reasonably poetic translation on facing pages accompanies the original text. What is more, the very pains-taking commentaries at the back of the book include what the editors call a “construe” for each poem: a literal word-for-word rendering that matches so far as possible the syntax of the Greek and Latin. A reader with even a rudimentary knowledge of the classical languages can thus get a fairly thorough idea of how the poems actually read. This edition also includes a complete critical apparatus for the Greek and Latin texts, a glossary of important terms, a short but useful introduction, a table of parallel passages between *Memoriae Matris Sacrum* and *The Temple*, and an extensive bibliography.

Some readers may wonder why a short, “minor” work in a pair of “dead” languages requires such an elaborate presentation. In the first place, the availability of Latin and Greek poetry by a great English poet reminds us of the immense importance of classical poetry in the formation of the imaginations of the writers of vernacular works—not merely in a general thematic way, but also in the shaping of detailed verbal nuance. Scholars unaware of the continuing influence of their classical education on the minds of early modern writers will inevitably fail to grasp crucial elements in the style and meaning in the English works of the period. The table of similar passages in *Memoriae Matris Sacrum* and *The Temple* is especially illuminating in this regard. Scholars who enhance our awareness of the vast, mostly unexplored territory of Renaissance Neo-Latin writing augment our capacity to interpret with more confidence and finesse the prominent authors whose English writings we value.

In any case, Herbert himself is certainly important enough that anything he wrote ought to interest us sufficiently to afford it close attention, and since *Memoriae Matris Sacrum* first appeared with Donne’s memorial sermon, there is the added interest of the relationship between these two poets. This edition also opens a window into the poet’s most intimate feelings for his mother—at the very least an inviting avenue of investigation for social historians. What is more, by truly studying these poems carefully and translating them both accurately and readably for the first time, Freis, Freis, and Miller furnish a means of correcting the errors

of the handful of critics who have glanced superficially at Herbert's poetic tribute to his mother and exploited it in order to advance a peculiar critical agenda. The commentary on the first poem of the set provides a good example of how the editors are able to refute tendentious interpretations based on faulty translation.

The most important reason for this very fine edition, however, is that *Memoriae Matris Sacrum* includes a number of quite fine poems fully deserving attention on their own merits. The editors are justified in calling them "gem-like." In their commentary, the editors call attention to the artistry with which Herbert deploys the idiomatic features of Latin. In poem 6, for example, described as a "satirical invective" aimed at "Galenus," a stock figure for a physician, the poet mingles with bitter irony at the expense of medicine's impotence in the face of the sorrows of the heart, an especially tender and poignant—because unanticipated—tribute to his deceased mother. This is possible because of the syntactical flexibility of a highly inflected language, like Latin, as well as the *diminuendo* of the Alcaic strophe's shortening final lines:

Impos medendi, occidere si potes,  
Nec sic parentem ducar ad optimam:  
    Ni sanctè, uti mater, recedam,  
    Morte magis viduabor illâ.

[Unable to heal, you have the power to kill,  
But this isn't the way either by which I'll be led to the best parent:  
    If I do not leave life in a holy way, as my mother did,  
    I'll be by that death shorn of her the more, her widow.]

The unwieldiness of the translation tells the story: Herbert's verse is a model of witty compression, embodying in its terseness a tender irony tinged with bitterness. The separation of "optimam" from "parentem" and the placement of the former at the line's end, made possible by Latin syntax, qualifies the taunting of the hapless physician by recalling the virtue of the poet's mother. Medicine, which could not save her earthly life, is also incapable of assuaging the poet's grief. The only solace for a son whose mother's death has left him "widowed"—diction that is both witty and touching—is to emulate her holiness and bear the crosses life brings with her patience.

Herbert is not merely constructing an artificial set of schoolboy verses in formulaic Latin: his mastery of the ancient tongues is such that he can write genuine poetry that repays the most detailed investigation we can give it. Indeed, he is able to express in Latin his most subtle thoughts and heartfelt emotions. Anyone who will take the time and trouble to become familiar with the poems of *Memoriae Matris Sacrum* as poetry will enjoy an authentic literary experience, which goes beyond the extended knowledge of Herbert's personal life and his historical background, also available in this volume.

Scholars of early modern literature therefore owe a debt of gratitude not only to the editors of this volume, but also to the editor of *The George Herbert Journal* for making it available. Nevertheless, the publication of this excellent edition as a volume of *GHJ* does raise a question: why was it not published by a university press, and why not many more editions like it? The only good reason for the existence of university presses is, after all, to provide for the publication of works of high scholarship with a necessarily limited appeal.

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