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Creating George Herbert

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George Herbert, *The English Poems of George Herbert*, ed. Helen Wilcox, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007. xlvi + 740 pp.

Scholarly study of the English priest and poet George Herbert has since World War II become a major activity in the literary profession. The tradition of Herbert scholarship, from Rosemond Tuve, Joseph Summers, and Rosalie Colie through Louis Martz, Barbara Lewalski, and Arnold Stein to more recent studies by Heather Asals, Michael Schoenfieldt, Barbara Harmon, and Terry Sherwood, to name but a few, has illuminated the work of Herbert while it has also staged some of the major scholarly controversies of this period. In the process, the figure of Herbert has proved remarkably protean. He has been hailed by Stanley Fish and Helen Vendler for his innovations in poetic form and rhetorical strategies while he has been claimed as their own by readers from a wide range of theological and spiritual persuasions, from Greek Orthodoxy to Ignatian Catholicism to Erasmian humanism to Calvinism to Methodism.

The fullest manifestation of this critical popularity might well be said to be the international Herbert Conference of 2007–2008, which met for multi-day sessions in both Salisbury, England, and Greensboro, North Carolina, with only a year-long break in the middle. The jury is still out as to whether this discipline of gathering in the name of George Herbert will become as structuring an event in the lives of Herbert scholars as was Herbert's own fascination with choral Evensong, which led him regularly to take the mile-long path that ran from his rectory in Bemerton on pilgrimage to Salisbury Cathedral. In any case, Herbert is definitely

approaching that critical status as major writer previously reserved in seventeenth-century scholarship for Donne and Milton.

Helen Wilcox's new edition of George Herbert's English poems was introduced to the scholarly world at the 2007 meeting of this Conference in Salisbury. It is both a product of recent scholarly interest in Herbert, and a detailed and thorough guide to it. As the work of Cambridge University Press, it follows in a long tradition of editions, since the Cambridge University Press printed the very first edition of Herbert's English poems in 1633. Wilcox as editor is also in a grand tradition, since that first edition of Herbert was seen through the press by Nicholas Ferrar, Herbert's friend and literary executor.

Wilcox, Professor of English at the University of Wales in Bangor, has prepared a solidly edited, reliable, conservative text of Herbert's *Temple* (1633) as well as of 15 poems by Herbert not included in that edition. She has also included detailed textual and interpretive notes and extensive summaries of interpretations and critical perspectives. One can hardly imagine, short of a fully developed Variorum edition of Herbert, a better guide to the richness of recent Herbert scholarship in its controversies and complexities. Wilcox's edition will surely become the standard edition of these poems for the community of Herbert scholars.

Nevertheless, given the greater scope for a reviewer provided by the editors of *John Donne Journal*, I want to raise two issues regarding Wilcox's text of Herbert. Neither point has much to do with Wilcox's work on this edition, but much more to do with the technology of its production. My first point has to do with the design of the volume, while the second has to do with the decision in this digital age to produce for Herbert a printed edition. The very strengths of this edition, the result of very hard work on Wilcox's part, are presented in this volume in ways that obscure its usefulness. At the same time, the decision to produce a printed edition, within the parameters and limitations chosen for this volume, obscure the nature of what we know, and don't know, about Herbert's text. In the process of discussing these points I also want to note how Wilcox's edition reminds us of the extent to which Herbert's editor is, to a large extent, a co-creator, with Herbert, of what we experience when we set out to read Herbert's works.

Wilcox's edition is intended for a scholarly audience, surely, and not a general audience. Nevertheless, even scholars want to read the poetry. The point of an edition would seem to be to present the texts of a writer

in usable form. If so, the point is obscured in this edition because of decisions about the layout of the volume. Herbert's most famous work consists of a series of relatively short lyric poems—the ones that occupy the Church section of his *Temple* collection, each of which presumably is to be read in relationship to the poems on either side of it as well as on its own terms. Here, each poem is isolated from the rest of the series because of a decision to gather into a lengthy headnote the textual apparatus, lists of sources, and summaries of the history of interpretation. The location of this material distances each poem from the poem that comes before it by as many as four full pages of text. Each poem is further separated from the poem after it by a line-by-line commentary on textual and interpretive issues. As a result, two or more pages of critical apparatus separate each poem from the poem that precedes or follows it. Valuable as all this information is when one has questions about the poems, I find it a bit much to wade through when I simply want to read Herbert's poems.

The basic problem of finding Herbert's texts in this edition is compounded by the decision on someone's part to print the texts of the poems in a typeface not significantly different in size or font style from those chosen for the various kinds of apparatus. Much of this problem could have been alleviated by better and more efficient organization of information, more effective use of visual distinctions between kinds of material, relegation of certain material to the bottom of pages, and so forth. Thomas Buck and Roger Daniel, printers to Cambridge University, are justly praised for the quality of their work on the original, 1633, edition of *The Temple*. Wilcox's masterful scholarly work was ill-served by their heirs, the graphic designers at the Cambridge University Press in 2007, over whose plans, presumably, she had little control.

Nevertheless, Wilcox's decision about what kind of edition to produce has consequences for its ability to present Herbert's text to us. The challenges presented by the task of editing Herbert are at once very straightforward and clear, yet surprisingly complex in terms of their consequences for what kind of poet we take Herbert to be. To make this point, I need to rehearse briefly the sources for any edition of Herbert's English poems. Leaving aside texts of a few occasional poems and a few corrections provided by the second and subsequent printed editions, these sources include two manuscripts and one printed edition. One manuscript, now MS Tanner 307 in Oxford's Bodleian Library and

known as *B*, contains essentially Herbert's *Temple* as we now know it. The printed edition is that of 1633, which also contains essentially the same texts in the same order as *B*. The second manuscript is now MS Jones B 62 in Dr. Williams's Library in London, known as *W*; it consists of the texts of sixty-nine poems that appear in both *B* and *1633*, though some are in significantly different versions. *W* also includes poems in Latin as well as a number of English poems not included in either *B* or *1633*.

The key question when editing Herbert is to decide the relationship between *B* and *1633* and their relationship to *W*. Generally, W is understood to be from a much earlier time than either *B* or *1633*, and thus the versions of poems it contains are understood to be by Herbert (indeed, some or all of *W* is believed by many to be in Herbert's own hand) and constitute earlier drafts of these poems, presumably revised later by Herbert into the versions we have in *B* and *1633*. Similarly, the exclusion of a few poems in *W* from *B* and *1633* is understood to represent Herbert's decision. On the grounds that a scholarly edition should represent an author's final wishes, therefore, the selection, order, and text of poems in *B* and *1633* define Herbert's *Temple,* so that the poems in *W* not included in *B* or *1633* are grouped by Wilcox (and in fact all other editors of Herbert I know of) into a separate category, in Wilcox's case defined as "Miscellaneous English Poems," and made to stand beside a few other poems by Herbert that were never, as far as anyone knows, considered part of a collection of poems that would eventually get (from Nicholas Ferrar, according to Wilcox, p. xxxviii) the overall title of *The Temple.*

If Ferrar may in fact be the creator of *The Temple* (as a concept of a collection of poetry, with three sections—The Church-Porch, The Church, The Church Militant—though not of the individual poems that populate those sections), he certainly is responsible for the physical objects represented by both *B* and *1633*. According to Izaak Walton, Herbert entrusted the manuscript of his poems to Ferrar, to be published "if he can think it may turn to the advantage of any dejected poor Soul."[1] *B* is generally understood to be a copy of that manuscript, now lost, prepared by Ferrar's Little Gidding community. *1633* is the printed

[1]Walton, "Life of Mr. George Herbert," in *Lives* (Oxford: World's Classics, 1927), p. 314.

edition of Herbert's manuscript, with Ferrar's title and Preface added to it, set into type at the Cambridge University Press, again, presumably, from Herbert's manuscript that was also the basis for *B*.

Absent Herbert's own manuscript of his poems, editors are left with *B* and *1633* since both, presumably, were created from direct observation of Herbert's manuscript. Editors over the years have chosen between the two witnesses to Herbert's text to serve as their copytext. Wilcox chooses *1633*, as I did in my 1981 modern-spelling edition for the Paulist Press.[2] Others, including Barbara K. Lewalski and Andrew J. Sabol in their 1973 edition for Odyssey Press, have chosen *B*.[3] Wilcox's great predecessor, F. E. Hutchinson, in his Oxford edition of 1941,[4] tried to have it both ways, choosing B for substantive readings and *1633* for what Fredson Bowers called "accidentals," the spelling, punctuation, use of capitol letters, and use of italics. Whatever the decision, one result has been the relative disappearance of *W* as a source; its versions of *Temple* poems are regarded as early, while its poems (presumably part of Herbert's overall design at one point) that do not make it either into *B* or *1633* get preserved but only as part of the category "miscellaneous."

This is not the place to stage an argument for the overall value of *W vis-à-vis* either *B* or *1633*, or to debate the relative merits of either *B* or *1633*; let me point out, however, a couple of ways in which such decisions affect what we get in Wilcox's edition and how that influences what kind of poet we understand Herbert to be. The simplest might be to point out one consequence of deciding that one will print a traditional edition of Herbert. That necessitates deciding whether *B* or *1633* is the basis on of one's edition. Wilcox chooses *1633*; this decision means, for example, that she, in editing "The Collar," Herbert's most well-known poem, chooses the reading of *1633* at lines 19–26, thus:

> Recover all thy sigh-blown age
> On double pleasures: leave thy cold dispute

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[2]Wall, ed., *The Country Parson, The Temple* (New York: Paulist Press, 1981).

[3]Lewalski and Sabol, eds., *Major Poets of the Earlier Seventeenth Century* (New York: Odyssey Press, 1973).

[4]Hutchinson, ed., *The Works of George Herbert* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1941).

> Of what is fit, and not forsake thy cage,
> Thy rope of sands,
> Which pettie thoughts have made, and made to thee
> Good cable, to enforce and draw,
> And be thy law,
> While thou didst wink and wouldst not see.

Had she chosen *B*, she would, perhaps, have printed line 21 as Lewalski and Sabol did:

> Of what is fitt, and not. Forsake thy cage. . . .

B actually reads, here, "Of what is fit, and not. forsake thy Cage," and so forth.

The use of a lower-case "f" in *B*, together with the absence of a period in *1633* leads Wilcox, and many other editors, to read this line as Wilcox gives it to us. The consequences are significant, however, for our understanding of the poem. If one follows the reading of *W*, including the end-stop punctuation after "not," and perhaps the emendation of "forsake" to a capitol "F," as Lewalski and Sabol have it, this line forms part of a syntactical pattern of parallel statements. The speaker says he instructs his "heart" to do a series of things: "Recover all thy sigh-blown age," "leave thy cold dispute," and "Forsake thy cage" made by "pettie thoughts" to be "thy law" while "thou didst wink and wouldst not see." In other words, the speaker's counsel to his heart seems positive and insightful, even though the speaker immediately rejects it with a dismissive "Away: take heed. / I will abroad."

If one reads the poem as Wilcox does, however, the third term of this parallel structure is turned on its head. The speaker's advice to "recover" and "leave" turns negative—not to "forsake" but presumably to remain imprisoned by the "cage" of sandy ropes that thoughts have made "to be thy law" while he was winking and not seeing what was going on. This has seemed, to many, very odd advice indeed. Some critics have taken this very confusing sentence as evidence for the consequences for the speaker's mental state of the inner debate he has been reporting on. This is not the time to rehearse this conflict of interpretations, much less to resolve it, but to point out how a basic editorial decision can affect deeply our understanding of what Herbert is about in this poem.

A different, though related matter has to do with Herbert's shaped poems, especially "Easter-Wings." In *W*, both stanzas of "Easter-Wings" are written with a flush right margin, presumably to evoke the image of wings. In *B*, stanza one and, to a lesser degree, stanza two are written with the lines skewed to the right though with the second through the ninth lines of each stanza gradually moving away from and then closer to the right margin, inscribing a gentle curve away from and then back to the right margin. *1633* reverses this, with the middle lines of each stanza skewed toward the left margin rather than the right, though the lines of each stanza are now once again, as with *W*, made to curve away from and then back to the margin. Further, in *1633*, the lines are printed vertically on the page rather than horizontally. Among modern editors, Hutchinson perhaps started the practice of printing each stanza of the poem centered on the page, so that each stanza, for the first time appears symmetrical, perhaps on analogy with "The Altar," where each line of the poem is centered on the page so the form of the poem is very clear.

The shape of this poem has significance because it places the poem in the emblem tradition in which the visual appearance of the poem gives visual form to words and ideas in the poem. The speaker asks, in each stanza, to rise, on the wings of the Risen Christ in stanza one and "as larks" in stanza two, hence the relevance of a visual image of wings. Yet another implication of the shape formed by these lines has been promoted by Hutchinson's decision to center the lines of each stanza, reminding many readers of Herbert of the shape of the hourglass as well as of wings and thus suggesting the way Christ's resurrection transforms time, making it lead us to resurrection instead of our mortality as a final ending.

Wilcox here of course chooses *1633*, with its attention to the left margin, as her model for the spacing of the lines in this edition, even though the witness of both *W* and *B* is for a spacing with special regard for the right margin. So she accepts the spacing chosen by the original Cambridge typesetter, even though *W* is (at least partially) in Herbert's own hand and *B* was transcribed from Herbert's own manuscript. Her decision not to follow Hutchinson toward symmetry pretty much undercuts readings that see in this image the hourglass as well as wings. Yet Wilcox provides more information about the shape of this poem than any editor of Herbert I know of, since she prints an image of the poem as given in *B* and *1633* and describes its appearance in *W* (see pp.

143–146). She also chooses to follow not only the shape of *1633* for each stanza but also its placing of the poem on the page, with the left margin of both stanzas facing upwards (p. 147), so that, as with *1633*, one must physically turn the book sideways to read this poem.

There is yet one more way in which editorial decisions necessary for printed editions affect our understanding of what we have in Herbert's poetry. Herbert is well-known as an innovator in poetic form, rarely using the same stanza form twice and, in such poems as "Prayer I," profoundly reshaping traditional expectations about such forms as the sonnet. Yet how much, and what kind of innovation was he capable of? "The Church-floore" is a particularly dramatic example; here, the poem begins with 4 stanzas of three lines each, with a rhyme pattern, thus: *abc abd efc efd.* The first line of each of these stanzas has 10 syllables; the second line, 6 syllables; the third, 3 or 4 syllables. These twelve lines are followed by an eight-line stanza rhymed *gg hi ih jj.* Here, each line has 8 syllables except lines 15 and 18, which have 5 syllables each. In spite of this dramatic shift in form, however, the two parts of the poem seem linked by the fact that the subject of both sections remains constant, a careful working-out of a comparison between the floor of a church and the heart of the worshipper.

"The Church-floore" only exists in *B* and *1633*. A poem similar to it in the dramatic use of two different stanza forms is "Easter," which is found in all three sources for Herbert's text. "Easter" in *B* and *1633*, and thus in Wilcox's edition consists of six stanzas, the first three of which contain six lines each, rhymed *aa bb cc*, then *dd ee ff*, then *gg hh dd.* The second part of the poem again consists of three stanzas, this time of four lines each, rhymed *ijij klkl mnmn.* In this poem, however, the subject matter and not just the stanza form changes dramatically between lines 18 and 19. The opening 18 lines are about how the heart at Easter rises to praise "thy Lord," while the lute awakens to turn the wood of the cross into the sound of celebration; defects in both heart and lute are compensated for by the "Spirit" that makes "up our defects with his sweet art."

In the second section of the poem, however, the speaker finds that whatever he or the sun does on Easter to prepare for the Risen Christ they are both too late for the one who is always gone before. "Easter" may be seen as an example of the kind of formal experimentation represented by "The Church-floore," taken one step further by linking

not only two stanza forms but two rhetorical and imagistic structures within the same poem, yet the evidence is complicated by the fact that "Easter" is contained in the *W* manuscript as well as the *B* manuscript and the *1633* printed edition. In *W*, however, the sections of "Easter" are no longer two parts of a single poem but two separate poems, both named "Easter." John T. Shawcross has argued that what we find in *B* and *1633* as one poem is in fact two poems, and that their coming together to be regarded as a single poem is a consequence of manuscript textual transmission during which the original independent title for the second part of "Easter" was lost.[5]

It is surely the case that Herbert wrote several poems with the same name—the three poems named "Love," for example—and that the distinguishing of one of these poems from the others by naming them "Love (I)," "Love (II)," and "Love (III)" is entirely an editorial imposition that has come to be accepted as Herbertian. There is thus no reason, other than editorial tradition, to retain the numbers added to Herbert's titles. On the other hand, one could also argue, based on the example of "The Church-floore," presumably a later poem than the "Easter" poems since no text of it appears in *W*, that Herbert's maturing poetic experimentation took him in the direction of fusing multiple forms into a single poem, and that his revisions of two poems called "Easter" into a single poem reflects that development. One could also argue, as Shawcross has also done, that the two dramatically different sections of "The Church-floore" are actually two separate poems, again on the analogy of the "Easter" poems in *W*, and should be regarded as such by modern editors.

Barring the recovery of the manuscript that Herbert sent to Ferrar, we are left with confusing, contradictory, or absent evidence to resolve these matters. Aiming to produce a single continuous edition of the poems, Wilcox, like all previous editors, has had to make decisions among

[5]Shawcross, "Herbert's Double Poems: A Problem in the Text of *The Temple*," in *"Too Rich to Clothe the Sunne": Essays on George Herbert*, ed. Claude J. Summers and Ted-Larry Pebworth (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1980), pp. 211–228. I followed this line of reasoning in my 1981 edition.

alternatives.[6] Short of printing multiple alternative versions of poems for which the status of the text is ambiguous or open to more than one interpretation, she has done about what one can do. Even had she offered multiple versions of contested poems, the presentation of this information would interrupt the reading experience of one poem at a time, and each poem in an order.

Fortunately, the advent of digital editions offers new possibilities. Available to us today is the opportunity to do an edition as a kind of tool kit, with the editor providing resources for editing and guides to issues and problems so that readers could try out different solutions and reassemble the entire text in multiple versions for uncluttered, thoughtful reading according to the implications of this or that set of assumptions. Source materials could be stored in digital form for easy reference. The vast amount of critical and interpretive material Wilcox has so carefully assembled here—and far, far more—could be available to the reader, yet invisible except when needed. Wilcox's edition of Herbert, for all its strengths, shows us as well the limits of its technology of production. One hopes that the Cambridge University Press, with all its resources, will continue its innovative history of care for Herbert's text by using this edition as the basis for the first of a new generation of editions in electronic format.

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[6]In my 1981 edition, I chose to print "Easter" as two poems, one entitled "Easter I" and the other entitled "Easter II." I printed "The Church-floore" as a single poem.