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Community (review)*

Jeffrey Powers-Beck

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Book Review

Greg Miller, *George Herbert's "Holy Patterns": Reforming Individuals in Community*. New York: Continuum, 2007. 174 pp. \$115.00 cloth.

by Jeffrey Powers-Beck

Greg Miller's *George Herbert's "Holy Patterns"* treats various topics in George Herbert's life, social networks, poetry, and other writings. The topics include Herbert's Latin poems for his mother in *Memoriae Matris Sacrum*; the art and symbolism of the Herbert family tomb in St. Nicholas Church in Montgomery, Wales; the Williams manuscript of Herbert's poetry and its connections to the Ferrar family's circulation of coterie manuscripts; the religious themes of *The Winding Sheet*, a Little Gidding dialogue, and its affinity to Herbert's mixture of providential and prudential thinking; the poet's long and close relations with Francis Lord Bacon, and their similar concepts of truth, disinterestedness, and friendship; Herbert's imaginative response to Judaism in his poetry; and the "poetics of unending conversion" that preserves the individual poetic voice within the communal framework of the lyrics of *The Temple*. Reciting this list makes the book sound like a collection of assorted essays from a group of Herbert scholars, but it is instead the work of a single author, a literary historian straining to bring these scattered tesserae together into a mosaic of the poet's social but individual art.

Miller's book begins, as he believes Herbert's artistic career did, with the influence of Magdalen Herbert, and he attempts, through his own translation, to show that the poet's Latin verses on his mother's death have been overly neglected and disparaged. Miller conceives of Magdalen as a muse to George Herbert's poetry and the *Memoriae* as a turning point in the poet's career. Rather than seeing the Latin poetry as "fulsome" (Amy Charles's term for the *Memoriae*'s extravagant praise), Miller praises the verses as keen examples of the poet's self-parody. At this key moment in his life, he was "turning seriously from false humility to bold daring," making increasing use of Roman

Catholic and baroque imagery, but also experimenting with the self-parody that was crucial to his mature poetry (pp. 13-14). This reading of Herbert's Latin verses to his mother eventually leads Miller down an even more shadowy avenue – an investigation of the tomb of Richard Herbert, George's father, and the possibility that Magdalen Herbert influenced the design and symbolism of the tomb's sculpture art. Given the few remaining records regarding the tomb, the damage done to the monument over the years, and the absence of any direct references to it in George's writings, this is a tough case to make. However, Miller does present a well-substantiated argument that the tomb represented Magdalen's conception of the aristocratic eminence of the Herbert and Newport families, and also conveyed her own religious views that combined humanism, Roman Catholic traditions, and Protestant beliefs. As such, the monument is quite nuanced, befitting the complexities of an aristocratic family maintaining feudal values in the world of the Reformation. The implication is that Magdalen Herbert passed on this complex religious and social vision to George Herbert and her other children.

The third and fourth chapters examine Herbert's connections with the Ferrars and the Little Gidding community. In chapter three, noting that the poet and the Ferrars shared an interest in the Virginia Company, Miller posits that Herbert assembled the Williams manuscript for a coterie audience, a small circle like Little Gidding. Miller describes this special audience for the Williams manuscript as neither "fully public or private," but as a careful group of like-minded friends and family (p. 43). He goes on to suggest that the Williams manuscript is a better indicator of Herbert's intentions for coterie transmission than the Bodleian manuscript, and that a now-lost text with similarities to the William manuscript was behind the 1633 printing of *The Temple* at Cambridge. While Miller admits that this is speculation, he does assemble convincing evidence that the Williams manuscript presents "a glimpse of a poet sharing the process of transformation with a community through which he had been transformed" (p. 51), Little Gidding. In chapter four, he reads the Ferrar dialogue, *The Winding-Sheet*, as an important record of Little Gidding's Catholic influences on Herbert and the community's celebration of George Herbert's holy life and poetry. Both the Little Gidding dialogue and Herbert's poetry express skepticism concerning

state churches and Stuart politics, but combine prudential and providential themes (p. 70). Miller admits that *The Winding-Sheet* and *The Temple* are different in key respects, but also evoke many similar values and arise from similar communities of faith.

After focusing on Magdalen Herbert and the Ferrars, Miller turns to consider Francis Bacon and his long correspondence with and influence on George Herbert. In chapter five, one of the most incisive in the book, he proposes that Herbert and Bacon shared a common model of truth as disinterested that is “part of a common royalist and Anglican strategy to reject the sincere ‘enthusiasm’ of separatists who defied royal and ecclesiastical authority in favor of private inspiration” (p. 77). Following Joseph Summers, Miller argues cogently that Herbert’s intellectual debt to Bacon was profound, not just in his Latin verses and prose works, but also in his religious poetry. The disinterested community of science that Bacon imagined in *The New Atlantis* influenced Herbert’s criticism of self-interested and bad science in poems like “Divinitie.” Likewise, Miller contends that Herbert’s poem “Humilitie” is an extended allegorical defense of Francis Bacon during his impeachment that satirizes the abuses of Stuart courtiers like Edward Coke. In chapter six, he adds that Herbert and Bacon shared an aristocratic ideal of friendship that was being strongly challenged during their lifetimes, one that Herbert saw as based in Christian self-sacrifice.

The argument moves next, rather inexplicably, to the subject of “Herbert’s Philo-Semitism.” Chapter seven contrasts Mark Katz’s view that Herbert’s comments on Judaism were condescending and insulting with Inge Leimberg’s view that Herbert was sympathetic in his references to the Jews. Although Miller comes down in a very qualified way in support of Leimberg, the quotation marks around the chapter title are appropriate, as he admits that Herbert’s “imaginative sympathies [for the Jewish people] are nevertheless seriously limited” (p. 134). The balanced conclusion of the chapter seems right, but the links to the book’s overall argument seem tenuous.

In his final chapter, Miller returns to tension between community and individuals in Herbert’s writings and focuses on the lyrics of *The Temple*. Although the first six chapters of the book stress the poet’s connections to various communities (i.e., to Magdalen Herbert and the extended Herbert and Newport clans, the Ferrars and Little Gidding,

and Sir Francis Bacon and his supporters), the final chapter of the book reminds us that the lyrics bespeak an “individual, distinctive response to God’s call” (p. 138). In reading these lyrics, Miller notes how the speaker represents his kinship with the fallen world through his broken “feet,” but the metaphor also associates him with the feet of his crucified Lord. In several poems, God appears as the “supreme artist,” able to reconcile the broken and disjunctive voices of his creations. Noting the importance of the individual’s “calling” in the lyrics, and specifically the calling of the Christian poet, Miller says that “Herbert consistently prays that Christ’s sacrifice ‘take up’ . . . his poem’s (and life’s) measures” (p. 159). In other words, much in *“Holy Patterns”* articulates the poet’s aristocratic and learned social circles, but the experience of God in the personal lyrics transcends any class, coterie, or knightly crest.

In sum, Greg Miller’s *George Herbert’s “Holy Patterns”* is a far-ranging and well-researched work written by a skillful literary historian sensitive to the nuances in the poet’s writings and the complexities of his situation. The strain to define Herbert’s “communities” in a way that can unite the diverse chapters is obvious from the first page of the book. In the preface, Miller himself notes that “this study does not offer an exhaustive study of all of Herbert’s communities. . . Nor does it offer a final definition of community” (p. xiii). Rather, Miller ventures into loosely but intriguingly related areas of Herbert’s life and art that have been neglected by critics, and he makes valuable connections, discoveries, and insights along the way, especially in the chapters on Bacon. In this complex mosaic of Herbert scholarship, some of the tiles certainly deserve even further study.

East Tennessee State University