



Kimberly Johnson. *Made Flesh: Sacrament and Poetics in Post-Reformation England*

Kimberly Johnson. *Made Flesh: Sacrament and Poetics in Post-Reformation England*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2014. 248p., ill. ISBN 9780812245882. US \$59.95 (hardcover).

Kimberly Johnson's *Made Flesh* makes clear the goal of her work in its striking and direct opening sentence: "This is a book about how poems work, and about how the interpretive demands of sacramental worship inform the production of poetic texts" (1). Johnson sets her project apart from other critical texts on post-Reformation sacramental poetics, which aimed to do this very thing, but failed, as Johnson posits, to truly engage "the way poems work as literary artifacts" (1). Ultimately this criticism regarding prior scholarship is primarily concerned with sacramental meanings, rather than the poetry itself. In the area of post-Enlightenment sacramental poetry criticism, Johnson's work stands out as a project concerned with not only the *what* of poetics but also, and significantly, the *how*.

Indeed, Johnson's work is concerned with the substance - the "flesh" - of seventeenth-century lyric poetry, yet that engagement with form exhibited throughout the book is never detached from the hermeneutical or the historical. Rather, the approach is multidimensional and effective in that Johnson's attentiveness to structure works to expand interpretation and widen our sense of post-Reformation Christian thought, particularly as it relates to the sacrament. The goal Johnson has set out to accomplish is thus achieved.

The book includes an introduction that in addition to stating Johnson's intentions also incorporates a review of previous literature on the topic. For those unfamiliar with this area of criticism, the review provides a welcome survey of what has come previously, what areas of contention have been identified, and what has been missing. The book then steps into the project of poetics with readings of seventeenth-century lyrical poets, focusing on one poet per chapter. Chapter 1 pertains to George Herbert and in particular his *The Temple*. The subsequent chapter leads us through the work of Edward Taylor, a minister and poet who fled England for America. Johnson's third chapter engages with the work of John Donne. And the fourth and fifth chapters examine the poetry of Richard Crashaw and Robert Herrick, respectively.

One of the most compelling chapters deals with Taylor, whose *Preparatory Meditations* delivers stunning examples of the inextricable link between the structure and content of the works. Johnson interestingly contends, for example, that in the *Meditations* "the expressivities of poetic form are marshaled as a means of securing the lyric event to its material expression" (87). And while there are shocking intimacies suggested in Taylor's work, intimacy is posited as a given in Crashaw's, and this proposition renders Johnson's argument all the more compelling. As the critic notes in respect to Crashaw, "[his work] leads him to employ poetic strategies that strain the symbolic function of language itself" (121). In fact, this chapter seems to be the crux of Johnson's entire work: "Crashaw's verse exposes the frustrations of Eucharistic worship in a poetics precisely calibrated to the ritual's competing demands of spiritual signification and surface resistance. Crashaw's writing produces hermeneutic arrest, amplifying the corporeal, symbolically indeterminate registers of his language until it becomes referentially opaque" (141). Crashaw seems to exemplify the "made-ness" and "fleshy-ness" of post-Reformation lyric poetry that is of particular interest to Johnson. And it is near the close of this chapter that Johnson makes a call for more scholarly focus on this area, due to the meaningfulness and substantiality of Crashaw's text, as well as to the need to situate it more clearly in the context of devotional poetry in the seventeenth century.

Made Flesh is a book concerned with the matter of poetry in every sense of the word. It sheds light on the making of form, of the artifact that is the poem, but also the content and the



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meaning of the poem. Though Johnson's primary task at hand is to analyze the poetry of Herbert, Taylor, Donne, Crashaw, and Harrick, her treatment of the authors themselves is substantial, especially as it pertains to their portrayal in contemporaneous editions and their illustrations. Thus historians of authorship and print culture will find this work useful. This monograph will also be relevant to scholars interested in Christian history and literature, post-Reformation culture, and seventeenth-century poetry. More generally, given the attention to the construction and interpretation of poems, those fascinated by poetics will also find this work to be interesting and valuable.

Amy Hezel
Regis University