

# EARLY MODERN LITERARY STUDIES



**Frances Cruickshank, *Verse and Poetics in George Herbert and John Donne*  
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In the first of the seven sonnets that make up ‘La Corona’, John Donne makes a request for his poetry:

... doe not, with a vile crown of fraile bayes,  
Reward my muse’s white sincerity,  
But what thy thorny crown gain’d, that give mee,  
A crowne of Glory, which doth flower alwayes (ll. 5-8).<sup>1</sup>

For Donne, the writing of his religious poetry is itself a method of achieving salvation. George Herbert works on similar lines, but has a significant emphasis on style, and the access to sacred knowledge writing mediates – as he writes in the first ‘Jordan’ poem,

Must all be vail’d, while he that reades, divines,  
Catching the sense at two removes? (ll. 9-10)

These instances are taken from the many moments at which these two poets address the theoretical issues of their poetry. Such questions are the central concern for Frances Cruickshank’s highly stimulating book on *Verse and Poetics in George Herbert and John Donne*. In dealing with this topic, she is especially keen to respond to ‘the aesthetic naivety of much recent scholarship’ (p. 5) by asserting the ‘radically textual’ character (p. 6) of early modern poetry. To do so means attempting to ‘capture something of the glitter and thrust of verse in action’ (p. 12) which is largely obscured

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<sup>1</sup> Quotations from the poetry of Donne and Herbert use *The Poems of John Donne*, ed. by Herbert Grierson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1912) and *The Works of George Herbert*, ed. by F. E. Hutchinson (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1941).

in the (currently dominant) modes of historicist literary criticism. What this means, in practice, is to keep a concentrated focus on the poetic 'inventions' that have so baffled, intrigued, and even awed their readers for centuries (p. 117), while willingly bringing them into wider discussion about early modern thought and culture.

This project is approached through four connected chapters concerned with formal aspects of the two poets' work. The first deals directly with the way they understood and represented poetry itself, a topic in which they both demonstrate considerable 'self-awareness' (p. 15). A major problem for both of them is the 'ongoing struggle for sincerity and the aesthetic desire for art' (p. 28). Ultimately their efforts depend largely on the organizing forces of the 'ideal reader' of the poetry – which, in many cases, is God. The second chapter hones in on the use of metaphor in Christian poetics. Metaphor takes on an important role, providing the reader with a kind of doctrinal truth they should 'take and taste' (p. 47) without needing intellectual interrogation. As Herbert wrote in the important poem 'Divinitie', 'all the doctrine, which he taught and gave, / Was cleare as heav'n, from whence it came' (ll. 13-14). Donne, by contrast, seems far more willing to admit a value in metaphorical expression, 'captivated by figuration' (p. 48) as he is.

The opening two chapters lay the groundwork for a further two chapters that deal with more specific aspects of metaphor in Donne and Herbert's poetry, especially natural imagery and the Eucharist. As Cruickshank writes, nature imagery in Donne and Herbert's poetry 'is abundant, fertile and productive' (p. 67). This kind of imagery can describe a wide range of phenomena and feelings, but to Herbert it is especially valuable for its regenerative character – as he writes in 'The Flower' (p. 75), 'How fresh, O Lord, how sweet and clean / Are thy returns! ev'n as the flowers in spring' (ll. 1-2). Also, the natural often resonates very pertinently with the literary, with Donne writing of his verse as 'love-song weeds, and Satyrique thornes' (p. 72; 'To Mr Rowland Woodward', l. 5), and thereby making this area all the more appropriate for the overall aims of this book.

The comparisons between the two poets are at their most interesting in the chapter on sacrament, a special case owing to its importance in Christian doctrine and practice. For Cruickshank, 'Herbert's persistent and explicit impulse is to expand the ceremony', while Donne prefers to focus on the limited range of its material circumstances (p. 97). In Herbert, this depends on the 'homeliness' of his poetry, in which the sacrament can easily be seen as 'a fruition of earthly processes' (p. 100): he writes of 'When God vouchsafeth to become our fare' ('The Priesthood', l. 27), or how 'what sweetnesse from the bowl / Fills my soul, / Such as is and makes divine!' ('The Banquet', ll. 7-9).

By contrast, Donne's more anxious personal disposition instead focusses on the literal actualization of the sacramental images: 'he clings to emblems as assurances of grace', with the material world providing assurance in 'outward and sensible signs and seals' (p. 108) that the spiritual realm itself could not offer.

Overall, this is a valuable book, full of suggestive remarks and interesting connections between texts. Moreover, Cruickshank's writing is highly accessible: always lucid, she always takes time to carefully describe a wider cultural context of the poetry that is her main focus. As a result, it's likely that *Verse and Poetics* could be enjoyed by a wide audience. Having said that, the book has some aspects that remain less satisfying. Cruickshank often seems disposed to take her poets at their word. For example, while Herbert and Donne debate sincerity, the discussion remains on their (theoretical) level, leaving aside the more challenging questions of how sincerity and belief might be registered in writing. Cruickshank's engagement with Renaissance studies seems to go less far than we might hope: while her broad-brush polemic on the state of criticism is suggestive, it lacks the specificity to be genuinely convincing. Whatever virtues are possessed by the handful of critics Cruickshank praises, they are not discussed.

Nonetheless, the book is useful, unpretentious, and succinct response to two of the most persistently fascinating poets of the early seventeenth century. *Verse and Poetics* has no investment in being the 'final word' on the texts it discusses, and actively invites us to return to the original poems. Whatever directions appear to be unexplored by Cruickshank (whether critical, theoretical, or religious), the reader is well equipped to begin their own reading apropos of the texts and interventions she suggests. As such, this book might prove especially useful for anyone beginning to teach Herbert and Donne, offering as it does a critical thematic guide instead of a strictly prescriptive reading.