

Helen Wilcox, ed. *The English Poems of George Herbert*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007. xlv + 740 + 5 illus. Review by JEFFREY P. BECK, EAST TENNESSEE STATE UNIVERSITY.

Historians of the book sometimes refer to the codex book form itself as a distinctive technology and compare the book to a machine. Never is a reader more aware of the “book as machine” as when confronting a meticulously edited text with a rich scholarly apparatus. *The English Poems of George Herbert* is such a machine, a complicated and fascinating one with many moving parts and an immense weight of scholarly tradition. The editor’s work in assembling the machine of Herbert’s poetry with a variorum of commentary is no simple one, and she undertakes it with great industry. Her goal, described in her introduction as an appreciation of the paradoxes of Herbert’s English verse, however, she characterizes with modesty in Herbert’s own phrase from “Prayer (I)” as “something understood” (xxxvi).

So what “something” is Wilcox attempting to understand in *The English Poems*? And, just as importantly, what is she not seeking to understand? Obviously, the volume contains none of Herbert’s Latin verse, nor does it contain his prose in either English or Latin. The focus of the volume is on the English lyrics of *The Temple*, upon which she rightly says “Herbert’s fame rests” (xxii). The main contents of the volume are divided by the sections of *The Temple*: The Church-Porch (37-86), The Church (87-663), and the Church-Militant (664-687). Aside from these verses, only fifteen other English poems from Izaak Walton’s life of the poet and other manuscript sources are included in the volume. “These [fifteen] works show H. [Herbert] writing in more familial, social and public contexts,” says Wilcox correctly (xl), although only thirty-four pages of the book are devoted to such poems. Since the volume is principally devoted to line-by-line commentary from twentieth-century critics on the poems of *The Temple*, Wilcox’s edition amasses a formidable variorum commentary on topics such as Herbert’s use of the Bible in his verse, his stylistic innovations and paradoxical use of English verse forms, his remaking of secular forms for spiritual uses, the resonant speakers and voices of *The Temple*, the liturgy and sacraments of Herbert’s church, and the

theological controversies of the poems, among many others. Naturally, when an editor makes choices to include, she also makes choices to exclude, and these choices do both enable and limit the reader's ability to understand the paradoxes of George Herbert's poetry. About this, more later, after an examination of the text of the English poems.

Since Wilcox's *English Poems* is an edition, scholars will ask about the editorial assumptions behind the volume. As do most scholarly editors, Wilcox prefers the historical text closest to the author's intentions, and she settles firmly on 1633 edition of *The Temple*. She soundly argues that the historical text with its original spellings is preferable for appreciating Herbert's puns, word-play, and verbal texture to a modernized text. The chief difficulty in producing such a volume is deciding between the claims of the first printed edition of *The Temple* in 1633, the Bodleian manuscript of 1633, and the earlier Williams manuscript. In studying Herbert's verse, editors have been almost equally divided between the authority of the 1633 print edition and the Bodleian manuscript. Most critics believe the elegant Bodleian manuscript was produced by a member of Nicholas Ferrar's Little Gidding community for the licensing of *The Temple* in 1633, but that it was NOT the "little Book" manuscript of *The Temple* that Herbert himself gave to Ferrar's friend Edmund Duncon shortly before his death in March of 1633. Unfortunately, Herbert's "little Book" is not among the Ferrar Papers and so Herbert's own death-bed manuscript of *The Temple* has almost certainly been lost. Wilcox then comes to the conclusion that "the work of a skillful printer overseen by H's close friend's [i.e., the text of the printer Thomas Buck in 1633, overseen by the Ferrar family] is preferable to an elegant but sometimes idiosyncratic manuscript [i.e., the Bodleian manuscript]" (xxxix). Having come to this conclusion, Wilcox makes a thorough-going use of the 1633 text, with only three minor exceptions. First, she corrects a few obvious misreading in the 1633 text (from the second printed edition of *The Temple* or the Bodleian manuscript); second, she substitutes lower-case "s" for the long "s" of Buck's text; and third, she removes the capitalization of the second letter of each poem in 1633. While these final decisions appear somewhat arbitrary, given the overall reliance on almost everything else in 1633, they do remind me of a story Elizabeth Bishop used to tell of asking a student to read the

opening of “Love unknown” with the famous long “s,” and hearing, “Dear Friend, fit down, the tale is long and fad.” While Wilcox’s text is overall an homage to the work of Herbert’s original printer, it does solve this one modern problem.

In thinking about Wilcox’s choice of copy-text and her close allegiance to 1633, it is instructive to compare *The English Poems* to *The Works of George Herbert*, edited by F.E. Hutchinson, published in 1941. In his magisterial volume, Hutchinson came to very similar conclusions about the Bodleian and 1633 texts but chose a more nuanced editorial approach, preferring the Bodleian text for substantive verbal differences and stanza patterns and preferring the 1633 text for spelling, punctuation, and use of capitals. So readers will notice that while Hutchinson retained the stanza numbering of “The Church-porch” or the eight-line stanzas of “Even-song” in the Bodleian manuscripts, Wilcox removes the numbering of “The Church-porch” and uses the four-line stanzas of “Even-song” in the 1633 text. In comparing the Hutchinson and Wilcox editions, one also notices that Hutchinson notes almost every variant between the Bodleian, Williams, and 1633 editions, whereas Wilcox notes only those she considers “major variants.” The overall effect is of an accurately but minimally edited text, very close to the 1633 edition, with less emphasis on editorial apparatus. Instead, Wilcox’s emphasis is on modern criticism of *The Temple*, and this is the predominant strength of the volume.

If one is looking for commentary on any individual poem of *The Temple*, seeking to discover what Chana Bloch, or Richard Strier, or Helen Vendler, or John Shawcross, or any other critic had to say about any line of the poem, and to know about the Biblical allusions, literary forms, and other stylistic matters of the verse, there is no better volume than Wilcox’s *The English Poems of George Herbert*. It certainly provides plenty of scholarly commentary on the paradoxical poet-priest’s best work. However, the very strengths of the volume (its many pages devoted to this commentary) prevent it from exploring other elements of Herbert’s life and art. For example, one of Herbert’s most commented upon poems in recent decades has been a Latin poem about beauty in blackness, “Aethiopissa ambit Cestum Diversi Coloris Virum.” Although Wilcox refers to the poem several times in her notes, the rather arbitrary exclusion of Latin poetry from the

volume prevents a more thorough-going analysis of the important social issues of race and class in Herbert's poetic world. Similarly, the exclusion of Latin verse from the volume removes any possible mention of William Kerrigan's provocative essay "Ritual Man" (1985) on Herbert's Latin poems on his mother's death. Of course, Wilcox is not attempting in her volume to address other texts, and she is only marginally concerned with the social and political issues that arise in Herbert's prose and Latin poetry. As Wilcox never purports to understand entirely Herbert's social and poetic world, or even all the paradoxes of this poet-priest, one can very much applaud the "something understood" in *The English Poems of George Herbert*.

John Gouws, ed. *Nicholas Oldisworth's Manuscript (Bodleian MS. Don.c.24)*. Tempe, AZ: Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 2009. xlv + 256 pp. \$54.00. Review by A.H. DE QUEHEN, UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO.

Nicholas Oldisworth was a Gloucestershire man, the nephew of Sir Thomas Overbury, about whose murder he made a collection of papers now in the British Library. He was baptised at Bourton-on-the Hill in 1611, and after his education at Westminster School and Christ Church, Oxford, he became the rector of that parish. He married in 1641 and died four years later, survived by his wife and two of their three children. At Christ Church, where he was an exact contemporary of William Cartwright, Oldisworth wrote a quantity of poetry, which he transcribed the year before his death and dedicated to his wife. John Gouws has edited this holograph of 119 poems (Bodleian MS. Don.c.24), supplemented by additional poems, and variant readings, from several manuscripts and printed books (in particular, Folger MS. V.a.170, which contains forty-two of his poems). The edition includes a biographical and critical introduction and fairly detailed explanatory notes.

Oldisworth writes mostly decasyllabic couplets; also octosyllabic and stanzas of several kinds. There is not much modulation in his verse as he hastens on from line to line, but that is not to be expected from an enthusiastic novice. Had Oldisworth persisted as a poet, he