

Theresa DiPasquale. *Refiguring the Sacred Feminine: The Poems of John Donne, Aemilia Lanyer, and John Milton*. Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2008. xiii + 392 pp. \$60.00. Review by JUDITH SCHERER HERZ, CONCORDIA UNIVERSITY, MONTREAL.

Concentrating on the figure of Wisdom in *Proverbs*, the *Song of Solomon*, the deuterocanonical *Ecclesiasticus* and the *Wisdom of Solomon*, and, as well, on the figure of Mary in *Luke* and of Ecclesia in the Pauline epistles, this study examines crucial texts in the writings of Donne, Lanyer, and Milton as each “portrays the feminine as a reflection of the divine, and woman . . . as an agent of redemption or conduit of grace” (2). All three, it is argued, find in Mary an inspiration for their poetic practice. Indeed the entire study is founded on a deeply felt and nuanced Christian feminism.

The aim is to examine each writer in the light cast by the examination of the other two. To a degree this happens in the occasional phrase—like Milton, unlike Donne—but essentially these are three separate studies, which do not always, at least for this reader, usefully comment on each other. I say this in part, because while the Donne section works particularly well and is genuinely illuminating and often original, the other two, especially the Milton section, make this thematic thread blur too many important differences. However, it is not the reviewer’s task to offer her Lanyer or her Milton but rather to lay out the argument on offer, and it is an important argument that carefully positions itself in relation to the scholarly and critical literature. DiPasquale knows the theological materials and the critical debates exceptionally well, engaging them with tact and insight. And it is well written with some neat turns of phrase (I particularly like the description of the sonnet as a 14 line wooing apparatus).

The Donne section begins with a close examination of a little studied text, “The Annunciation and the Passion,” offering an original reading in relation to Donne’s idiosyncratic fusion of Roman Catholic and reformed theology: “the virgin mother and the soul who is both her daughter and her reflection . . . are, so to speak, the first and second persons of an earthly feminine triad” (29). Although Donne is still some years away from ordination, DiPasquale makes clear how this text intimates what his theological goal as priest in the

English church will be. This is followed by an examination of two holy sonnets, “Since she . . .” and “Show me deare Christ.” The first reading works with Anne as mortal sacrament defined in conjugal terms. The emphasis is on Anne’s pregnancies, her death, and Donne’s complex position in a marriage “where his soul remained fleshly and procreation meant death” (42). In “Show me deare Christ,” she uses both *Proverbs* and St. Augustine to tackle the sonnet’s problematic conclusion, offering a reading that emphasizes the “potential scandal of Donne as irresolute Protestant” (63). The concluding sections on the *Anniversaries* go over much familiar material, but with an original emphasis on the “idea of woman” that Elizabeth Drury figures, reading it as both “counterpoint and antidote to the dark ironies of fallen gender relations” (83). She argues that both poems show how difficult it was for Donne to forgo Marian devotion.

The Lanyer section is set up in contrast to the Donne insofar as Lanyer’s stance is explicitly anti-Jacobean in its view of the corruption of James’s court and in its address to Margaret Clifford who had detached herself from that court to lead a celibate life. The *Salve Deus* is read, in part, as a critique of Christian marriage “as it was really experienced by Jacobean noblewomen,” which gives a particular edge to the text’s emphasis on Christ as “the ultimate . . . object of woman’s desire” (163). Womanly virtue is understood as a force that unites human nature with the divine. Woman is understood as *Ecclesia* incarnate and this figure underwrites the emphasis on the feminized, eroticized body of Christ in the text, to say nothing of the depiction there of the various male martyrs. As with the Donne readings, these are in productive dialogue with those scholars who have written on the poem. As well, she works with the homoerotic readings of several critics, linking Lanyer’s “love of a feminized Christ [to] . . . her love of and desire for other women” (198). This is not the place to engage such readings other than to say that I have always found that they too readily confound desire for patronage with desire *tout court*. A class analysis is broached here but not elaborated, although there is a nice reading of that purloined kiss at the end that unites both approaches.

The Milton section moves from *Arcades* to *A Mask to Paradise Lost* to *Paradise Regained*, much to cover in 100 pages. Milton is seen as offering a “non conformist Christian Humanist version of the

sacred feminine that is uniquely his own” (216). In DiPasquale’s reading of *Arvades*, “Maternal Wisdom and Pastoral Ministry,” the emphasis is on the dowager Countess as she figures both the ancient mother goddess and the Wisdom of Solomon. In the *Mask* section (“Ecclesiastical Discipline and Virginal Wisdom”), it is on the Lady as a type of the church and as the bride in the *Song of Solomon*. The working through of the Kerrigan/Leonard/Shuger discussions of the gums of glutinous heat is nicely done. The conclusion that follows, however, that virtue is both free and feeble, does not really require the apparatus invoked. Similarly with *Paradise Lost* where Eve is positioned as a Wisdom figure, there is interesting local reading even if the overall approach is too “orthodox” for my taste. The implicit equation: Raphael as narrator surrogate equals the narrator as a necessarily trustworthy figure who equals Milton in a straightforward way seems to me constantly contradicted by the experience of the text. As with Dennis Danielson, whom she quotes, there is too much emphasis on what Adam *ought* to have done. The text certainly asserts “ought” but it enacts a far more complicated “is.” Still the parallels drawn between Eve and Sapientia as they lead to Eve’s echoes of divine Wisdom’s self-sacrificial love and to Mary as the second Eve helpfully conclude this section. The last section on *Paradise Regained* develops the arguments of both Dayton Haskins and John Rumrich. It focuses these through an important question: why the conclusion, why the last line: “home to his mother’s house private he return’d”? The answer examines the feminine dimension of Jesus, reading the son as student of Mary, the return tempering “Milton’s heroic portrait of the Messiah as masculine victor” (300).

Whether one’s interest is on the sacred feminine as figure, as ideal, as organizing principle or on these writers and their texts in relation to various interpretive agendas, this study offers useful materials with which to frame one’s questions and to look for some answers.