
Renaissance and Reformation
Renaissance et Réforme



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

David B. Goldstein

Volume 39, numéro 2, printemps 2016

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1086560ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.33137/rr.v39i2.26870>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

Iter Press

ISSN

0034-429X (imprimé)

2293-7374 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce compte rendu

Goldstein, D. (2016). Compte rendu de [Johnson, Kimberly. Made Flesh: Sacrament and Poetics in Post-Reformation England]. *Renaissance and Reformation / Renaissance et Réforme*, 39(2), 197–200.
<https://doi.org/10.33137/rr.v39i2.26870>

© Canadian Society for Renaissance Studies / Société canadienne d'études de la Renaissance; Pacific Northwest Renaissance Society; Toronto Renaissance and Reformation Colloquium; Victoria University Centre for Renaissance and Reformation Studies, 2016

Ce document est protégé par la loi sur le droit d'auteur. L'utilisation des services d'Érudit (y compris la reproduction) est assujettie à sa politique d'utilisation que vous pouvez consulter en ligne.

<https://apropos.erudit.org/fr/usagers/politique-dutilisation/>

érudit

Cet article est diffusé et préservé par Érudit.

Érudit est un consortium interuniversitaire sans but lucratif composé de l'Université de Montréal, l'Université Laval et l'Université du Québec à Montréal. Il a pour mission la promotion et la valorisation de la recherche.

<https://www.erudit.org/fr/>

of the *Dialogo* and stack the cards in Galileo's favour; resistance is futile, both scientifically and literarily, to Hall's Galileo. His disputes are mapped onto a caricature of Cervantes's rich world, and Galileo wins every time in the game of circular hermeneutics: Peripatetics misread the world just like Don Quixote. This, even though we know absolutely nothing about how, or even whether, Galileo read a word of Cervantes.

This is a promising avenue for research, and Hall should be commended for her original approach and evident skill at close reading. But if the history of reading is going to contribute to the practice of history, and especially the history of science, it has to bring with it a different kind of evidence than that required by literary criticism. Hall's more recent work, indeed, has already moved in this direction, interrogating the library lists as historical documents and bringing the new methodologies of digital humanities to bear upon them. *Galileo's Reading* is the first step into a new kind of history.

NICK WILDING

Georgia State University

Johnson, Kimberly.

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

Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2014. Pp. 237. ISBN 978-0-8122-4588-2 (hardcover) \$59.95.

Creating poetry and critiquing it are appreciably different skills. Kimberly Johnson is one of those rare writers who brilliantly combines the two. Author of three poetry collections and translator of Vigil's *Georgics*, Johnson has now turned her UC Berkeley dissertation into a sophisticated and groundbreaking analysis of seventeenth-century devotional poetry. Recent studies have demonstrated poetry's centrality in early modern English culture, and several have focused upon the theological preoccupations of seventeenth-century lyric. What sets this book apart is its rigorous focus upon the formal and material aspects of poetry—on poetics as how poetry means and functions differently from prose, rather than as a general term for literary politics or thematics. In *Made Flesh*, Johnson makes a powerful and necessary case for reading poetry *as poetry*—that is, not as “a set of theological treatises with line breaks” (27), but

as a kind of writing whose formal and material qualities are as intrinsic to its truth-claims as are its denotative meanings. Drawing upon the contemporary poet and theorist Charles Bernstein's ideas of "antiabsorptive" writing (23), Johnson argues that the central question in seventeenth-century poetry is not what but how. For Johnson, as for so many poets, content and form are inextricable. Poetry's resistance to lucid reading, its sinuous ambiguity, and its insistence upon its own "objecthood" (22) are the ultimate subject of the book.

Johnson's broad intervention into current critical approaches bears particular relevance to the monograph's thesis, which concerns how Reformation Eucharist debates inform post-Reformation poetry and poetics. "Seventeenth-century writers," argues Johnson, "assert the status of poems as artifacts with corporeal as well as symbolic resonances, such that the poems themselves embody the shifting and precarious relationship between materiality and signification" (6). Poems about the Eucharist enact the theologically contested relationship between the sign and its referent. If, as Johnson puts it, "the history of eucharistic theology in the sixteenth century is a history of theories about the operations of signification and figuration" (15), then the best or most interesting poems touching communion negotiate precisely those operations on the level of poetic language itself. The poetry of Johnson's study "displays a marked unwillingness to allow the word to become a mere transparent conduit to some imperceptible referent" (28). All these elements distinguish what she terms a "eucharistic poetics."

Johnson's first four chapters each address a major period writer. Chapter 1 studies George Herbert's *The Temple*, with its palpable experiments in concrete poetry. Acknowledging that Herbert famously "avoids engaging the terms of theological disputation" (46), Johnson argues that the poems aim to thematize "the unstable referentiality of the visual sign" (49) in their very prosody, thus serving "as an instrument for enfleshing Christ, for manifesting the divine as material presence" (53). Herbert's poetry explores in its objectness the problem of Christ's materiality, calling to account the absence of God's body through means more poetic than theological. Herbert's goal, writes Johnson in a felicitous phrase, is to make "of poetry itself a ceremony of immanence" (62). Chapter 2 examines the thematics of menstruation in the under-appreciated Calvinist poet Edward Taylor's *Preparatory Meditations*. In some ways the most original argument of the book, forging new paths in examining Taylor's strategies of self-feminization, this chapter also complicates the main thesis by

focusing less on instances of linguistic objecthood than on the broader structural arc of the work. If I was not always clear as to how these two approaches reinforced each other, Johnson nevertheless left me with a drastically more nuanced understanding of Taylor's poetic project.

Chapter 3 addresses John Donne's radical experiments in metaphors. Few topics in seventeenth-century lyric are more thoroughly trodden, but Johnson produces sharp and useful insights, showing that Herbert's concern for godly incarnation is of a piece with Donne's use of metaphor, which becomes "an optimal presencing engine" in his work (89). Through readings of numerous poems and sermons, Johnson builds on the insight that "For Donne, the figure of the sacramental word/Word doesn't *mean* presence; it *is* presence" (118). The chapter culminates in a delightful reframing of "The Flea," a poem that "dares us to resist the referential function of its central metaphor" (116). Chapter 4 examines the poetry of the Catholic convert Richard Crashaw, whose spectacular indecorousness "replicates the challenge of discerning Christ's body through the representational veils of bread and wine" (121). Johnson's argument here shows that antiabsorption in seventeenth-century sacramental poetry is not a narrowly Protestant phenomenon. The chapter further supports the ongoing rehabilitation of Crashaw as a major experimental poet of his time, elevating his "bad taste" to the status of poetic system.

Chapter 5 argues that "the representational implications of sacramental reform register as an insurgent priority on the sign as such" (157) even in more secular poets of the age, specifically Robert Herrick and Ben Jonson. Herrick, for example, better known for his passion for ornament and foodstuff than for religious disputation, "self-consciously emphasizes the lapidary constructedness of each text as a text" (152). Johnson's description of Herrick's surfaces illustrates clearly why interest in him is surging among contemporary experimental poets, but the relationship between sacramental pressures and poetic antiabsorption need not be causal to be powerful. Relatedly, I kept thinking back throughout the book to the sixteenth-century post-Reformation poets whose obsessions with surfaces, objectness, and even the concrete form of the physical page, are ripe for analysis: the coterie of the Devonshire Manuscript, Sidney, Spenser, the young Shakespeare, and Puttenham with his concrete visual experiments, to name a few. Critics would do well to apply Johnson's techniques to a re-evaluation of Elizabethan prosody. If seventeenth-century poetic

devotion is marked by antiabsorption, might earlier post-Reformation poetry also have risen to this challenge with its own rich and diverse set of strategies?

DAVID B. GOLDSTEIN

York University

Luther, Martin.

***On the Freedom of a Christian: With Related Texts.* Ed., trans., and intro. Tryntje Helfferich.**

Indianapolis: Hacker Publishing, 2013. Pp. xxviii, 132. ISBN 978-0-87220-768-4 (paperback) \$10.

Written in 1520, *On the Freedom of a Christian* is one of Luther's major tracts and perhaps the most influential. Its significance lies in its comprehensiveness: the whole of Christian life is contained in a brief form. The ongoing conflict between the gospel and its enemies forms the context for Luther's defence of Christian freedom. At the heart of such freedom are the antithetical words of Paul: "I am free in all things and have made myself a servant of everyone" (I Cor. 9:19). Luther explores this antithesis carefully and thoroughly in thirty theses, in such a manner that does not obscure the Word of God; the latter must reign above all human agencies and accretions. Throughout, Luther shows no personal animosity towards Pope Leo X. What was at stake for him was the truth of gospel, and on that basis he remains adamant. One particular opponent of this gospel is Johann Eck, whom Luther considers "a special enemy of Christ and the truth" (10).

In this volume, Helfferich extends beyond Luther and the mainstream Reformation to include the primary writings of Catholic opponents of Luther and the Radical reformer. Their seminal texts are Eck's *Enchiridion or Handbook of Commonplaces and Articles against the New Teachings Currently Wafting About*, John Fisher's *Sermons against the Pernicious Doctrine of Martin Luther*, and Thomas Müntzer's *Highly Provoked Defence*. In so doing he helps the reader to identify the complex historical background against which Luther challenges the teachings and authority of the Old Church while concurrently supplying the blueprint for the new. On the one hand, these texts introduce readers to the key theological concepts taught by Luther, the Catholic theologians, and