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Perry, Nandra.

Imitatio Christi: The Poetics of Piety in Early Modern England.

Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2014. Pp. viii, 280. ISBN 978-0-268-03841-0 (paperback) \$32.

Nandra Perry's *Imitatio Christi: The Poetics of Piety in Early Modern England* is an elegantly structured and sensitively researched examination of *imitatio* as a site of cultural conflict in post-Reformation literature. Rejecting critical divisions of period, gender, and confession, Perry traces the engagements of authors as diverse as Philip Sidney, Elizabeth Cary, Charles I, and John Milton with *imitatio Christi*, and their attendant anxieties about the unreliability of language and the body as the site of signification. The organizing nexus of her discussion is Sidney, whose *Defence* of the transformative power of poetry shapes the responses of his literary successors to the capacity of *imitatio Christi* to rightly orient the reader's desire and manifest divine truth.

The first chapter traces the development of an optimistic, yet ambivalent, Protestant hermeneutic of *imitatio* in Thomas Rogers's translation of Thomas à Kempis's *Imitation of Christ* (1580) and Sidney's *Defence of Poesy*. Rogers discusses the rhetorical power of imitation to "inwardly inflame" the reader with desire for conversion (30), but concedes that even biblical models are subject to misinterpretation because scripture is mediated by fallible human language. Despite the acknowledged gap between contingent signs and their divine referents and the potential for meaning to be co-opted by misdirected desires, Rogers affirms the power of the sacred Word to effect genuine conversion when channelled through Christian eloquence and signified in the believer's disciplined body. Like Rogers, Sidney envisions a community of the Protestant, humanist faithful, shaped and sustained by eloquent words (12). In Sidney's *Defence*, poetry works analogously to the Word to reorient the reader's desire and manifest divine essence, but its circulation must be governed by decorum in order to avoid misappropriation by malicious or inexperienced readers.

The anxiety expressed by Rogers and Sidney about the potential for misinterpretation is developed more fully in Perry's examination of Elizabeth Cary's *Tragedy of Mariam* and the *Life* of Cary written by one of her daughters. Like Sidney, Cary links the proper use of *imitatio* to charitable decorum, in the form of respect for "natural" religious, social, and political hierarchies, which mitigates the threat of misuse by readers outside the community of believers.

In *The Tragedy of Mariam*, the eloquence of Mariam, like the speech of the recusant Catholic, is doomed to misinterpretation in the uncharitable realm of public discourse. Examining *Mariam* in the context of Protestant and Catholic martyrologies, Perry demonstrates that Mariam's silence, like that adopted by contemporary Catholic martyrs, is a tactical response to the "bold" public speech of her adversaries that transforms her martyred body into a symbol of transcendent truth (85). Graphina and Cary herself as portrayed in the *Life* offer alternative models of Christian eloquence. The discreet and decorous management of language adopted by both the coterie author and her literary creation is a model of "silent speech" to communicate the truth of one's conscience to a charitable community of believers (104).

In her third chapter, Perry focuses on debates about the signifying role of bodies in her examination of *Eikon Basilike*. Setting aside Milton's devastating critique of the *Eikon*, Perry investigates its tremendous appeal for a broad range of contemporary Protestant readers, reading the *Eikon* alongside Lewis Bayly's popular *Practice of Pietie*. In *The Practice of Pietie*, the body functions as a sacred signifier, and it is the duty of the believer to read his or her sinful body and revise it into conformity with the divine image (117). The body of the king is sacred because it functions as a "supersignifier" for the divine order and a catalyst for the process of sanctification (124). In Perry's analysis, *Eikon Basilike* was popular with contemporary Protestants, including Calvinists, because it adopts a hermeneutic of *imitatio* that was already an established feature of popular devotional culture (not, as Milton accuses, because it preys upon the superstitious beliefs of the ignorant). Because he surrenders himself completely to the will of God, Charles's body is transformed into a properly functioning sign, a transparent image of God that works "naturally" to reorient readers into a state of right relation with the divine and with each other (134). To submit to the will of the king, as Charles submits himself to the will of God, is thus the model of proper Christian *imitatio* that *Eikon Basilike* promotes.

In her fourth chapter, Perry returns to Milton, reading *Eikonoklastes* through the lens of the altar crisis of 1636–37. While Archbishop Laud and his supporters argue for the necessity of set prayers and bodily practices as stabilizers of the link between human signs and their divine referents, Laud's opponents reject them as concessions to a sinful human desire for surfaces (166); however, both sides seek to stabilize interpretation through metaphors of disciplined and disciplining bodies. In *Eikonoklastes*, Milton exposes the bodily

metaphors of *imitatio* as metaphors. His deconstructive analysis of the literary mechanisms of *imitatio* marks his radical break with a broader cultural faith in the correspondence between human signs and transcendent realities. In the absence of stable, collective meaning, it becomes the responsibility of the reader to stir up the fallen affections and engage in a search for transcendent truth that can never be complete. The body does not gesture to the transcendent, but rather to the subject's desire for transcendence.

One of the strengths of Perry's research is the attention she devotes to her contextual sources. Placing equal interpretive weight on martyrologies, polemical treatises, and devotional handbooks, her study offers fascinating revelations about the interplay between public and private, elite and popular, Catholic, Anglican, and Puritan—eliding traditional critical binaries. If Elizabeth Cary seems at first like the lone Catholic woman out, Perry's analysis demonstrates the usefulness of examining early modern women authors outside a universalizing gynocentric continuum. Her study also suggests directions for future research: What use (or misuse) did the multitude of unknown readers, so feared by Sidney and his successors, make of the *imitatio Christi*?

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Prodan, Sarah Rolfe.

Michelangelo's Christian Mysticism: Spirituality, Poetry, and Art in Sixteenth-Century Italy.

New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014. Pp. xiii, 251 +15 ill. ISBN 978-1-107-04376-3 (hardcover) \$99.95.

Pity the poor literary scholar who attempts to hack through the dense jungle of intertextuality that is the poetry of Michelangelo. The artist-author drew inspiration and imagery from a plethora of disparate sources, in a syncretic *ambiente* where every cultural vine was entwined with every other. Sarah Prodan succeeds with exemplary thoroughness, sensitivity, and balance in laying out the imbricated components of Michelangelo's poetic imaginary, from the canonical—Dante, Petrarch, Ficinian Neoplatonism—to the familiar but less exhaustively explored, particularly St. Augustine, the Catholic Reformation, and the