

THE HOMOEROTICS OF SEVENTEENTH-CENTURY DEVOTIONAL POETRY

Any discussion of homoerotic desire in seventeenth-century devotional poetry opens the critic to the charge that has dogged Leo Steinberg's ground-breaking discussion of the representation of Christ's genitalia in Renaissance art: that what Steinberg identifies as an *ostentatio genitalium* (the showing forth of the genitals), intimately related to the artists' concern with God's descent into human physicality, exists only in his "borderline pathological imagination": "overheated," "drooling," "strident," and "faintly hysterical" (345). Steinberg's lambasting would make any critic cautious; however, Richard Rambuss and others have pointed out that incarnational theology—concerned with the ramifications of God becoming flesh—permeates devotional poetry, producing a complex relationship between body and soul. Such poetry responds to the doctrine of the incarnation by focusing on specific and highly spectacular moments in Christ's human life: his nativity, circumcision, death, and resurrection; this focus is reinforced by seventeenth-century meditational practices that recommended using the iconic image of Christ in order to examine issues of sin and the flesh. However, as Sedgwick notes, this spectacularized figure of Christ—"unclothed or unclothable [...] often in extremis and / or ecstasy [and] [...] prescriptively meant to be gazed at and adored"—cannot escape its compromising homoerotic reality within a traditional Christian homophobia (140). Attempts to 'disembody' Christ's homoerotically appealing body "by attenuating, Europeanizing, or feminizing it" are doomed to failure, and in fact simply highlight these representations' homoeroticism in attempting to erase it. As Rambuss suggests, the doctrine of the incarnation can partially account for the eroticism of some sixteenth- and seventeenth-century devotional verse, but it cannot fully account for the "colliding decorums of spirituality and carnality, sanctity and profanity" and for "devotion's intensities and expressive perversities" (*Closet* 5).

Many of the period's major devotional poets grappled with the meaning of Christ's incarnation for their own spiritual lives and their relationship with Christ as incarnated. Many engage in anatomizing the various bodily realities, gestures, and liquids (e.g., sweat, blood, tears) that accompany Christ in the most significant bodily experiences of his life on earth, especially his circumcision and crucifixion. Christ becomes the beloved and the lover of these devotional poets: George Herbert's 'To John, Leaning on the Lord's Breast' imagines the relationship of Jesus and the beloved disciple John in terms of Jesus' ancient role as nurturing mother; Richard Crashaw's 'Blessed be the paps which thou hast sucked (Luke 11)' (print anthology, p. 360) connects the maternal breast and Christ's bloody wounds, spilling out his redeeming blood as a breast providing nurturing milk for the believer's consumption. Lanyer's *Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum* fashions an explicitly homoerotic relationship between the female devotional writer and Christ as feminized beloved, reworking the traditional marital metaphor of the Church / individual soul as bride, and Christ as bridegroom (print anthology, pp. 439-47).

Richard Crashaw returns most frequently to the spectacle of the homoeroticized body of Christ, offering "Christ's body as penetrable and penetrated" by instruments like spears, whips, thorns, nails, and pens (Rambuss, 'Pleasure' 254), in a series of poetic fantasies of travelling into Christ's body, and witnessing this body's simultaneous 'pouring out. Crashaw imagines a total permeability and connection with Christ through an emphasis on orifices, where wounds, for example, are mouths to kiss (see print anthology, p. 360-62). The ecstatic union of poet, reader, and Christ becomes predicated upon a homoerotics of desire, a merging of bodies and souls. In contrast, Donne's most famous homoerotic devotional poem, 'Holy Sonnet 14' ('Batter my Heart Three-Personed God') [print anthology, p. 350] involves the speaker's famous plea that God "ravish [him]," take him sexually by force (but also

overwhelm him with ecstatic astonishment) in order to reclaim him from the Devil who presently possesses him. In a rare move, Thomas Traherne's 'Love' is replete with allusions to classical mythology, and expresses the speaker's desire to be Christ's boy-bride, in the context of a meditation on the inexpressibility of "the true mysterious depths of blessedness" (print anthology, pp. 362-63).

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MARIE H. LOUGHLIN