

PRAYER AND PERFORMANCE IN EARLY MODERN ENGLISH LITERATURE

Early modern England was a nation alive with intense religious debate, with often violent results. Central to these debates were questions of prayer, questions powerful enough to splinter the English church and to fuel a ferocious civil war. This collection of thirteen newly commissioned essays traces the controversy and value given to the performance of prayer, through the body, the spoken word and written text, as well as its representation on stage. Through close readings of the works of Christopher Marlowe, William Shakespeare, John Donne, John Milton and Henry Vaughan, amongst others, this book examines the performative aspects of prayer in a range of literary modes. This broad range of study is expanded further with chapters focusing on the private religious diaries of men and women throughout the seventeenth century and the convergence of music and prayer in the work of William Byrd.

JOSEPH WILLIAM STERRETT is Associate Professor of English Literature at Aarhus University in Denmark. He is the author of *The Unheard Prayer: Religious Toleration in Shakespeare's Drama* (2012) and the co-editor, with Peter Thomas, of *Sacred Text – Sacred Space: Architectural, Literary and Spiritual Convergences in England and Wales* (2011).

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LITERATURE

Gesture, Word and Devotion

Edited by
JOSEPH WILLIAM STERRETT
Aarhus University, Denmark



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Contents

	<i>List of Contributors</i>	<i>page</i> vii
	<i>Thanksgiving</i>	xi
	Introduction: The Power of Performance in Prayer, Now and Then <i>Joseph William Sterrett</i>	I
1	Prayer, Bodily Ritual and Performative Utterance: Bucer, Calvin and the <i>Book of Common Prayer</i> <i>Brian Cummings</i>	16
2	The Tradition of High Church Prayer in the Seventeenth Century <i>Graham Parry</i>	37
3	Performed Prayer and Sixteenth-Century Non-Conformism <i>Joseph William Sterrett</i>	50
4	Enter Mercury, Sleeping: Delivering Prayers on the Early Modern Stage <i>Chloe Kathleen Preedy</i>	65
5	Prayer, Performance and Community in Early Modern Drama <i>Alison Findlay</i>	84
6	Playing at Prayer: The Spiritual Failure of Performance in <i>Hamlet</i> <i>Christopher Hodgkins</i>	100
7	Prayer and Musical Performance: The Verse Anthem <i>Simon Jackson</i>	110
8	The Protestant Diary and the Act of Prayer <i>Effie Botonaki</i>	126

vi	<i>Contents</i>	
9	Prayer in Context: The Dynamics of Worship in Donne's <i>Encenia</i> Sermon (1623) <i>Katrin Ettenhuber</i>	141
10	'Your Suit is Granted': Performing Prayer in Early Modern English Poetry <i>Helen Wilcox</i>	154
11	'The Royal Actor': King Charles I and the Performance of Prayer <i>Robert Wilcher</i>	169
12	Vaughan's Devotional Prose as Political Act and Prayer <i>Donald R. Dickson</i>	181
13	'The Spirit of Prayer Inspired': Invocation as Prayer in Milton's Poetic Imagination <i>Noam Reisner</i>	198
	<i>Notes</i>	212
	<i>Bibliography</i>	252
	<i>Index</i>	270

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List of Contributors

ix

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List of Contributors

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Thanksgiving

This book began many years ago in church. As I sat listening to the preacher praying in a manner I had heard countless times before, it suddenly seemed odd to me that his prayer consisted of a series of statements about doctrine, the fundamentals of belief and the appropriate actions and behaviour for the believer in her or his daily life. What purpose was there in telling these things to God who, if they were true, knew these things anyway? As I mused on this prayer, not the content or meaning of the words so much as their function, it struck me how much of this prayer was oriented toward its audience, including me, sitting in the church pews. I looked up and around the church. All heads were bowed, all eyes were closed, and the litany of familiar concepts and exhortations went on. It was at that moment I realised that this prayer was largely for me, to remind me of what it meant to be a good evangelical Christian, how I should orientate myself in my mind toward God and the language I should use to articulate this experience to others, fellow congregants, and myself. The language had an enclosing effect, guiding or keeping those who listened within the boundaries of good faith.

I am no longer an evangelical Christian, but I have never forgotten my musings that day. Much later, when I began to study prayer practice in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century England, I realised that what had struck me so intuitively in a small Presbyterian church at Round Hill, Virginia, had actually been the subject of fierce theological and political debate after the Reformation; a debate that for many years raged across Europe, Scotland, England, Wales and Ireland and would eventually shape the culture of America. The chapters in this book give those musings much more concrete intellectual and historical shape and form. It has been thrilling for me to be part of this discussion and I thank everyone who has shared my interest enough to take part.

I would like to thank all the contributors to this volume and the many others who joined in the discussion during the Prayer and Performance

conference at Aarhus, Denmark in 2012. I would especially like to thank Graham Parry and Helen Wilcox for their unfailing advice and support. My colleagues at Aarhus, Rainer Atzbach and Armin Geertz, were instrumental in the early stages of this project. I would also like to thank Achsah Guibbory, Alison Findlay, and Erik Ankerberg for their help. The book would not have been possible without the friendship and support of the late Peter Thomas. And warm thanks are also in order to Bob Wilcher, Jeremy Hooker, Hilary Davies and all of those who attend the annual Vaughan Colloquium in Wales. I would also like to thank Paula Devine for her superb assistance as copy editor and the staff at Cambridge University Press for their expert assistance throughout the production process.