

Introduction

The Temple is a curious and wonderful structure. Its three oddly assorted parts, *The Church-porch*, *The Church*, and *The Church Militant*, invite but finally resist interpretations of coherence: the spatial movement from exterior to interior of the first two parts gives way in the third to a design both spatial and temporal, while their formal diversity disunites, rather than links, the second-person didacticism of *The Church-porch*'s uniform stanzas, the first-person immediacy of *The Church*'s endlessly varied lyrics, and the sweeping history and prophecy contained by the regular couplets of *The Church Militant*. *The Church*, whose 160 separate poems detail continually shifting relations between a speaker and his God,¹ functions as centerpiece for *The Temple* as a whole but rejects the conventions of narrative sequence even as it seems to offer the story of a spiritual progress. Yet the two manuscripts of the work, *W* and *B*,² reveal two stages of writing at least: the poet both reordered and augmented the structural "parts" of *The Church*. Individual lyrics echo and re-echo each other in such interwoven complexity that no unitary explanation of their design can fully articulate the generative possibilities Herbert has succeeded in building into his *Temple*.³

The problem of narrative structure is compounded further by the enigma of the voice which speaks throughout *The Temple*: the Verser who addresses a "sweet youth" with "early hopes" in *The Church-porch*, the "I" who addresses God, the self, the world in the *Church* lyrics and who offers to God his own vision of church history in *The Church Militant*. Herbert's twentieth-century critics name that voice "the speaker" or "the Christian," consider the "I" persona rather than person, identify multiple personae changing from poem to poem. The speaking of spiritual experience in the first-person lyrics of *The Church* is now rarely read as a single voice recognizable as the

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author of *The Temple*, deliberately incorporating his own biography and history throughout the entire structure.

These two interpretive challenges – the nature of *The Temple's* structure and the identification of its speaker – govern my study of Herbert's poem(s) and determine both the form and the title of this book. I read *The Temple* as a relational, rather than a narrative, structure, one in which possibilities of sequence, progress, and defined movement from beginning to middle to end give place to fluid, continually shifting connections: from poem to poem in creatively disjunctive juxtaposition, across groups of poems, and especially between parts of poems, images, phrases, and situations call both forward and back in virtually inexhaustible repetition and variation. Each poem of *The Temple* (as well as each poem's parts) demands to be read in relation to other poems and parts. No single pattern of relations can ever finally and fully inform our reading; each relationship that we discover yields new connections and new meaning.

In "The H. Scriptures. II" Herbert describes just such a relational structure:

Oh that I knew how all thy lights combine,
And the configurations of their glorie!
Seeing not onely how each verse doth shine,
But all the constellations of the storie.
This verse marks that, and both do make a motion
Unto a third, that ten leaves off doth lie:
Then as dispersed herbs do watch a potion,
These three make up some Christians destinie. . . .⁴
(1–8)

The "configurations" and "constellations" that Herbert seeks to interpret in scripture provide a model for my reading of *The Temple* and offer a justification for my procedure.⁵ Herbert might well have modeled his construction of a poetic Temple on his configurative reading of the Bible. Like his, my reading will attend to the marking and motion of "verses" – parts, as well as wholes – by juxtaposing parts of two poems ("both do make a motion") to others "that ten leaves off doth lie." Herbert's analogy – "as dispersed herbs do watch a potion, / These three make up some Christians destinie" – claims interpretive value for parts, in the reader's effort to reassemble

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meaning out of dispersal, just as the strange passivity of the figure⁶ implies that meaning “awaits” – thus depends upon – the reader’s act of assemblage.

Scripture, then, exacts from each of its readers an individual interpretation, the discovery of the parallels that, Herbert says, “finde me out” and “make me understood.” I would reverse the terms and attempt instead to find out the “I” who speaks in *The Temple*, to make that voice understood by tracing the configuration I call “God’s courtier.”⁷ For if “The H. Scriptures. II” offers a model for interpreting the structure of *The Temple*, it may also provide a clue to the voice heard in its poems. Scripture, to Herbert, generates multiple configurations; any cluster of three (or more) verses, set into relationship by the reader, makes up “some” Christian’s destiny. But it is the configuration of “my life” that this speaker wants to read out of his text; and it is Herbert’s life that I wish to discover in the “I” who addresses us in *The Temple*, who offers “each part / Of my hard heart” (“The Altar”) to God in that frame, and whose “particularities of . . . condition and disposition” Nicholas Ferrar, in his preface to the work, discloses to its readers “for the clearing of some passages.”⁸

Ferrar’s claim that Herbert is “a pattern or more for the age he lived in” suggests that seventeenth-century readers *did* interpret the voice in *The Temple* as Herbert’s and raises the question of life-as-pattern: how can such a discontinuous and unconventional “narrative” reveal an intelligible pattern to its readers? There is no clear precedent in Renaissance texts for the form of *The Temple*, nor is there an apparent source in any earlier work of spiritual autobiography for the formal and topical profusion creating that pattern.⁹ Although I take as my critical task the articulation of Herbert’s “pattern . . . for the age he lived in,” I do not claim to offer a “definitive” interpretation of the structure of *The Temple*, nor would I argue that other readings of the voice in the poem are no longer valid. Herbert’s recent critics have enabled us to hear many voices in *The Church*. All readers of Herbert have experienced the delight and renewed insight of recognizing Stanley Fish’s wily catechist, Richard Strier’s subtle exponent of the doctrine of justification by faith, and Barbara Harman’s narrator who so finely weighs the costs of self-representation.¹⁰ Each of these readers of *The Temple* has configured a distinct pattern of utterance and emphasis and persuaded us of its validity. But as Fish points out in his conclusion to *The Living*

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Temple, “the shape of both the problem and its solution was a function of the interested perception that I brought to the tasks of scholarship and criticism” (p. 171). If “the past is always a structure seen in the context of the interests of the present and cannot otherwise be seen,” if each interpretation depends upon the particular “categories of understanding” (p. 172) that enable us, as critics, to see texts in new ways,¹¹ my endeavor is to make visible the configuration of a Renaissance courtier which I perceive in Herbert’s text. I hope through this perspective to enable other readers of *The Temple* in our time to see how that figure might have constituted a meaningful pattern for readers in Herbert’s age.

Biographical readings in our age are, with depressing frequency, discounted as critical naiveté. The validity of my approach must depend on my readers’ judgement. I hope they will recognize the extent to which biography and history are configured within the image of God’s courtier in *The Temple* once my evidence is set forth, and acknowledge my argument that Herbert deliberately incorporated his life into the poetic design in order to authorize his account of spiritual experience.¹² This kind of configuration, of course, does not exclude either selective use of biographical data or the retrospective patterning by which, necessarily, any artist gives shape to biographical material.

My configuration begins with hearing, rather than seeing. The voice of the “I” in *The Temple* sounds, from time to time, a cool and worldly note rather alien to the sweet singer of Bemerton whom we so often like to hear. He remarks on his relation to God in “The Priesthood”: “The distance of the meek / Doth flatter power.” In “Affliction” (I), he confesses, “I was entangled in the world of strife, / Before I had the power to change my life.” Searching his soul, the speaker of “The Sinner” finds “quarries of pil’d vanities, / But shreds of holinesse.” He offers a bargain to God in “Submission”:

Were it not better to bestow
Some place and power on me?
Then should thy praises with me grow,
And share in my degree.

(5–8)

This speaker has imagined that serving God might incorporate the advantages of great place: “and not onely I, / But all my wealth and

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familie might combine / To set thy honour up, as our designe" ("The Crosse"). Yet in self-admonishment he warns: "do not spread thy robe / In hope of great things" ("The Size").

We recognize how explicitly courtliness is patterned not only in tone, but image as well: the thickly piled velvet of "vanities" in "The Sinner" dresses a courtier no less than the "glorie and gay weeds" that prick the speaker's eyes in "Frailtie." Only a courtier would think to exchange his flower for Christ's thorns, his posy for Christ's rod, his bower for Christ's cross ("The Thanksgiving"). And the vignette of "brave Glorie puffing by / In silks that whistled" in "The Quip" is juxtaposed in telling particularity to the self-reference of the following stanza:

Then came quick Wit and Conversation,
And he would needs a comfort be,
And, to be short, make an Oration.
But thou shalt answer, Lord, for me.

(17–20)

This speaker's words, tone, images begin to figure a worldly self whose language betrays attachment to courtly values and courtly aspirations, who seeks to join earthly and heavenly dignities,¹³ whose desire to gain place in the world in giving himself to God recurs throughout the *Church* sequence as a dilemma never quite, never wholly mastered.

Critics have often acknowledged the presence of courtly style in Herbert and sometimes read his sequence as "sacred parody" of secular love lyrics.¹⁴ If we trace the configurations of courtliness in *The Temple*, however, we discover the power of the pattern as well as its persistence. God's courtier is wracked by contradictions, unvoiced by anxiety, tainted with pride, plagued by inner wranglers ("attendants," as Herbert puts it in "Affliction" (IV), who plot against him), obsessed by delay and inutility, longing for an unimaginable flowering. Herbert was criticized in his own time, Barnabas Oley tells us, for not having "managed his brave parts to advantage"; to these critics, he "lost himself in a humble way."¹⁵ The courtier patterned in *The Temple* does struggle against the loss of great place and the loss of the self which desires such place; this longing stands in the way of his equally urgent wish to give himself to God. As the ground of his dilemma, it shapes his complaints in a familiar contemporary form.

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I suggest that it is Herbert, not Walton,¹⁶ who first configures the courtier who must transfer his allegiance from the worldly court to the court of heaven. Walton's idealized image of his subject is far more unitary than the far-from-ideal representation Herbert has given us in *The Temple*. The absolute transformation Walton wants to show robs Herbert's text of its power to *exemplify*, a term that comprises both "being an exemplar," a model of striving toward goodness, and "being an example," sharing with one's readers insufficiency, limitation, fallibility – speaking, that is, for human imperfection. Herbert incorporates courtly ambition and earthly attachment into his first-person lyrics because they do re-present his life experience, because they can present an intelligible pattern to other worldly aspirers of his own age. He patterns a rejection of the court of this world: a rejection that takes years to make, that demands relinquishing much of what has constituted the "self," that exacts the replacement of worldly values and perspective with those of the court and the king of heaven.

Even critics who multiply the "I" of the *Church* lyrics into changing personae must come to terms with the self-perception of division and multiplicity within individual poems. Thomas Greene and Stephen Greenblatt have amply demonstrated how problematic the concept of self was for Renaissance writers;¹⁷ my interpretation of Herbert's "I" as person suggests that Herbert both recognizes and *raises* the question of self-identity by recording his experience of "divisions" and "partitions." In *The Church*, the self is divided by conflicting desires, continually redefining or attempting to transform its identity.

Harman's introductory chapter to *Costly Monuments*, "The Critical Controversy," traces a dialectic of "self" and "culture" (meaning, primarily, theology) among Herbert's major critics. She argues that

cultural ideas exert a force on persons – sometimes an extremely visible one, sometimes a less apparent and less easily describable one – and they shape the self's power to write itself up, out of, or as Herbert says in "Jordan (II)," into the sense (1. 14). What we need, therefore, is not a description of the way persons determine cultures, or culture determines persons, but rather an analysis of the dialectic relationship between the two. (p. 30)

My configuration of God's courtier in *The Temple* could be described as the tracing of a dialectic between Herbert and the culture

of courtiership; but by “configuration” I mean to suggest that the self continually reshapes its role in that dialectic by the process of *refiguring* from poem to poem. The courtier within *The Temple* rewrites the culture whose power to define him he both acknowledges and resists. In *Self-Consuming Artifacts*, Stanley Fish sets the self in dialectic with God in order to suggest the power of dissolving distinctions as the self attempts to lose itself in God. But in Chapter 6, I shall try to show how a poem like “Discipline” enacts a reconstructed relationship to God: here the self maintains identity because God’s courtier has rewritten his speech to God and thereby revised the roles both God and the self are to play.

Furthermore, the “I” of Herbert’s *Temple* is contextualized by history as well as biography. When Nicholas Ferrar claims Herbert as a pattern or more for his age, he is stressing a particular relation to a historical moment in which courtliness as an ideal maintained its power over the imagination, while actualizing that ideal, as England moved toward civil war and a rejection of court and king altogether, seemed ever less possible. The ideal courtier figured by sixteenth-century humanists, in theory, served both God and the prince and took both for his model.¹⁸ That these two exemplars might exert irreconcilable demands upon actual courtiers, the problem Herbert confronts in the *Church* lyrics, breaks into full consciousness only as the seventeenth-century courts of James and Charles begin to betray an ideal to which earlier courtiers had given assent, toward which it had still been possible to, at least, aspire.¹⁹ In this sense, I argue that Herbert speaks directly to the consciousness of his age: in his poetry, kings dissolve into heaps of decaying flesh no less than peasants, only God’s higher court can control his own inner wranglers, the braveries of the world are fictive delusions opposing the “simplesse, and sad events” of God’s “Regiment.”²⁰ He is telling his age that the courtly ideal is played out, deeply corrupt, riddled with contradictory demands, unactualizable. He is configuring himself as courtier in order to reconstruct the pattern of courtliness as a recovery of whatever ideal *potentia* it might still possess.

The reconstruction transforms the idea of the worldly courtier into the ideal of God’s courtier. The transformation is enacted in *The Church* by what Herbert depicts as a continuous “mending and making,” rewriting the pattern of self in poem after poem – and more, from one poem to another – in an attempt to lose his worldly desire for great place by taking up the humble way. As I shall try to show in Part Two of this book, the reconstruction is never complete.

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The courtier in Herbert's design will become God's servant, but the courtly self is never fully abandoned. The hard realism of the courtier still speaks in politic flattery to a very kingly God in "The Priesthood"; it is a marred and mortal lover of this world's goods – not a miraculously transformed "holy Mr. Herbert" – who sits to eat at Christ's feast in "Love" (III). The resolved serenity of Walton's simple, finally unitary figure lacks the complex authority of Herbert's courtier, in whom the elements of earth and heaven commingle with both honesty and authenticity. He gains the right to be an exemplar by participating in – as well as by denouncing – the ills of his time.

My configuration of God's courtier attempts, initially, to refigure the model of courtliness so equivocal, yet still so powerful, in Herbert's age. Part One, "The Court," establishes the courtly contexts out of which Herbert's text constructs a figure mingling piled vanities and shreds of holiness. Chapter 1 traces the structure of contradiction inherent to the courtly ideal. Courtesy books reveal how uneasily the makers of the pattern struggled to harmonize its "parts" – the dual claims of earth and heaven. These contradictions provide a ground for Herbert's pattern because, as Chapter 2 will show, would-be actualizers of the ideal could not avoid the irreconcilable demands of the two realms which had been built into its configuration. Chapter 2 also constructs a link between two major forms of exemplary biography: those like Walton's, designed to attest the holiness of their subjects, and those like the lives of Sidney by Thomas Moffet and Fulke Greville, intended to affirm an ideal of courtliness. These biographies are selective assemblages of events in their subjects' lives which articulate an ideal aspired to by these actual persons – or so it is claimed – in order to create a model for others to follow. They reveal, and confirm, that spiritual values inform the courtly ideal and that courtly values – service to the state, leading the ruler toward virtue – continue to inform the desire for an exemplary mode of vocation expressed by such seventeenth-century figures as Bishop John Williams, Henry Wotton, and George Herbert.

This chapter works out the configuration of entanglement. Ideal aspirations are enmeshed in the actual "world of strife" that all would-be exemplars must inhabit. Its center is Herbert himself, entangled in relationships with friends, family, patrons which offer conflicting models of service; entangled in a historical moment of increasing religious and political strife; entangled for at least seven

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years (from 1623 to 1630) by a delay in settling upon a vocation, for which none of the scanty biographical evidence quite accounts.

Chapter 3 completes my configuration of the courtly contexts which inform Herbert's construction of God's courtier in *The Temple*. We so customarily read Herbert as a devotional poet that, with the exception of Louis Martz's brilliant insights on Herbert and Sidney in *The Poetry of Meditation* and on Herbert and Carew in *The Wit of Love*,²¹ we seldom read his courtly voice in the context of other poets who take the uneasy equilibrium between ideal and actual versions of courtliness as their subject. Yet such poets as Wyatt, Gascoigne, Sidney, Carew, and Suckling offer a promising "category of understanding" for Herbert. They utilize linguistic strategies very like Herbert's, figure themselves as courtiers caught in nets of false and true speaking, respond to the continuing power of courtly ideality by continual attempts to reshape the model for their own time.²²

Part Two, "The Temple," then brings together the problems of structure and figure which I have proposed as my primary concern, and traces the transformations that redefine a building, a Temple, as a person, God's courtier. Chapter 4 examines Herbert's disintegration of the courtly world and the courtly self because, I argue, this act of unmaking is a necessary preliminary in Herbert's text to the remaking of the self. In "An Offering," Herbert proposes that, could he recover the "divisions" of lust and "partitions" of passion that have "parcell[ed] out" his heart, he might offer to God "many gifts in one." The wholeness he hopes to recover depends upon an initial *uncovering*, a self-disclosure of the hard heart's divisions and partitions. If we read individual poems in *The Church* as discrete entities, we shall find many recoveries of wholeness, transformative reconstructions of the divided self, and redirections of service to the king of heaven. Yet *The Church*, like *The Temple*, is a configuration of parts. Any given poem's validity of statement is simultaneously complete in itself *and* contingent upon its multiple relations with other poems, adjoining or "ten leaves off." Chapter 4 therefore studies those acts of fragmentation and attempts to recover wholeness which begin to configure a revised courtliness but cannot complete the task. We shall discover how pervasively the courtly world is subjected to dissolution in *The Church*, how fragmented language enacts such dissolutions, and how linguistic reconstructions stand as recoveries of what has been lost only within the framework of individual poems.

Chapter 5 will break through these self-enclosures to show how the configuration of God's courtier requires a continually rewritten text.²³ *The Church* contains a fragmented "plot," a sequence which repeatedly reverses sequential movement, a progress of choices that both advances and retreats, a structure of delays concerning the problem of vocation, one whose resolutions are broken by doubt and whose momentary assurances give way to renewed anxiety. These configurations reveal a far more difficult process of constructing an exemplary self than the resolved conclusions of individual poems might suggest; yet it is the courtly image refigured from poem to poem that enacts the *experience* of self-construction. I take the problem of vocation as my center in Chapter 5 because the transformation of the worldly courtier into God's courtier is centered in that search and grounded in Herbert's ultimate choice.

But as Chapter 6 will show, *The Temple* as a three-part structure rewrites, and asks us to reinterpret, even the apparent resolution of Herbert's search for vocation within *The Church*. The remade self joyously taking on the garments of priesthood in "Aaron" would seem to have completed its transformations. But *The Church* does not close with "Aaron," nor does the euphoria of that poem govern all the lyrics which follow it. Furthermore, *The Church* is not *The Temple*. Herbert has framed his chronicle of interior experience with two very different accounts: the advice to a sweet youth in *The Church-porch* that configures the society of contemporary England and the paired, but unequal, progresses of the Church and Sin through all times and places in *The Church Militant*. One might, in fact, wonder why *The Church* is not entitled *The Temple* and vice versa, since the lyric center of Herbert's work details the spiritual struggles of an individual "hard heart" trying to transform itself into a Temple fit for Christ to inhabit.

"Temple," in this sense, must mean "person." Neither the world of English society so dubiously placed outside the church in *The Church-porch* nor the institution so inexorably overtaken by Sin in *The Church Militant* can constitute a temple within the human heart. The exemplary pattern Herbert is creating, the image of God's courtier as Christ's temple, must be reinterpreted – once again, and continually – in the light of the world presented in the first and final poems of *The Temple*. This world constitutes the ground of spiritual experience, the place of action, the condition of being. Herbert shows that no transformation can be complete, given this ground and these conditions.