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Review Of "Carnal Rhetoric: Milton's Iconoclasm And The Poetics of Desire" by L. Cable

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Review

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showing how Buck turned, without manuscript authority, the poems ninety degrees to appear vertically. Buck's "most mischievous decision" (lxvii), Di Cesare contends, distorts meaning and reduces appreciation: "Beyond the shadow of a doubt, the manuscripts [both the early Williams manuscript and the Bodleian] presented these two poems as two poems" (lvii).

The Bodleian manuscript offers fascinating clues to other poems as well. Most editors, again following Buck, divide "Church Monuments" into four six-line stanzas, highlighting the conspicuous enjambment. The manuscript presents the poem without stanzaic division. Throughout the manuscript, the scribes of Little Gidding carefully marked interstanza spacing; lack of such division in "Church Monuments," according to Di Cesare, reveals the poem's "chilling continuity" (lxvii). Equally instructive are treatments of "Good Friday," "Deniall," and "The Collar." Most editions of *The Temple* have "Good Friday" as one eight stanza poem; the Bodleian manuscript provides only one title. The Williams manuscript provides, however, a separate title ("The Passion") for the final three stanzas, suggesting a different poem. Attention to prosody supports this notion. The final three quatrains, tetrameter lines rhyming AABB, depart from the previous five quatrains in dimeters and tetrameters. Although the scribes left no space for a separate title heading (not an atypical oversight), Di Cesare contends that Buck mistakenly printed the stanzas as one poem. Based upon his analysis, Di Cesare revises the number of "separate and distinct poetic entities" in *The Temple* to 174 (compared with 164 in the Hutchinson

edition).

Di Cesare does not burden his critical introduction with unnecessary theoretical complications. He discusses poetic intention and postulates a strong desire to remain faithful to the spirit of the original text. The forty-nine carefully selected illustrations demonstrate the notion that "Herbert's poetry is for the eye as well as for the ear" (xxxii). Five sections of superb textual notes and two indices complete the impressive scholarly apparatus. This diplomatic edition of *The Temple* will be widely used and cited for generations. With a quantum rise of scholarly interest in Herbert's poetry (more than 20 book-length studies in the past decade alone), Di Cesare's labor of love will ensure even greater fidelity to the enduring poetry of the country parson from Bemerton.

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Lana Cable. *Carnal Rhetoric: Milton's Iconoclasm and the Poetics of Desire*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1995. 1 pl. + x + 231 pp. \$44.95 cloth; \$17.95 paper.

At the center of Professor Cable's provocative book, four chapters closely analyzing major works of the poet's "left hand" constitute a history of the formation of Milton's iconoclastic poetics. Cable moves from the disjunction between the rational structure of argument and the frankly carnal language of Milton's polemical attacks on his opponents in the antiprelatical tracts, to the elevation of the carnal rhetoric of "perfect coupling" as a true image of unity with divine reality in the divorce tracts.

Milton's realization that his image of coupling had itself become an icon then leads to the recognition in *Aereopagitica* that no mortal language can adequately present divine truth, and finally to the use of that recognition as the prime strategy of attack in *Eikonoklastes*. The extent to which these analyses at once are distant from the details of Milton's personal and political life during this period and yet assume insight into his most intimate imaginative processes render this history suspect, but the particular readings of the works themselves are rich with insights into their rhetorical strategies and the affective power of their essentially poetic substance.

In the opening chapters Cable undertakes a theoretical understanding of the processes discovered at work in the tracts. In a comprehensive and widely learned critical review of metaphor theory she finds the essence of Milton's iconological art in the exploitation of the pervasive doubt that arises from the failure of figurative language ever to close the gap between vehicle and tenor, between image and thing imaged. This doubt, she argues, has its most powerful affective presence when language "drives from the mental to the physical" in images drawn from the real world and bodies which we inhabit (45). In a realization of the tension between the identity which metaphorical figuration asserts and the mere likeness which it can actually demonstrate, the creativity of the iconological imagination arises as it demands the search for a new figure which will more fully express the identity — even as the process itself continually enforces the awareness that such identity can never be fulfilled.

To rest in the assumption that identity has been truly attained is to be guilty of fixing the infinity of divine truth in an icon, as Adam did when he took the image of God in Eve to be very God, the error of which the divine voice accuses him in *Paradise Lost* by asking "Was she thy God?" (116). The creative iconoclast, in contrast, refuses the temptation to a "conceptual rest and peace" not to be found in the created world, where the act of creation itself instituted a temporally unbridgeable division between God and the carnal images which can only represent, but never fully signify, his presence. In the reiterated shattering and reconstitution of its own icons, carnal rhetoric, driven by "ontological longing" and constituting the "transformative desire" to become God thus engages in the only mortally possible approach to truth, a process which bears witness not to the unknowable truth itself, but to its existence as affirmed by a refusal to relinquish the search for it.

This radically simplified summary cannot possibly do justice to Cable's dense and critically sophisticated argument. Almost every page of *Carnal Rhetoric* provokes the reader's return to the prose and the poems to test Cable's claims and the terms in which they are made. If that return leads one, as it did me, to as many quarrels and qualifications as agreements, the value of her work is nonetheless affirmed — perhaps most fittingly as yet another turn of that iconoclastic "true intent" which in Cable's closing chapter is shown to be the exemplary issue of Samson's agon of glory and shame in Milton's last major poem.

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