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Tessie Prakas. *Poetic Priesthood in the Seventeenth Century: Reformed Ministry and Radical Verse.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022. 256 pp. ISBN 9780192857125. \$90.00 hardcover.

“Thou honour’st verse, and verse must lend her wing / To honour thee, the priest of Phoebus’ choir” wrote John Milton in 1646 to his friend and collaborator, musician Henry Lawes, offering a vision of the relationship between poetry and priesthood underpinned by music and a sense of mutual responsibility: Apollo’s priest (Lawes) has served verse and Milton’s verse will serve the priest in turn.¹ According to Tessie Prakas’s intelligent and persuasive study, in the shifting landscape of post-Reformation England and amidst competing definitions of conformity in seventeenth-century liturgical contexts, poetry is often called upon not only to serve priesthood but to supplant it. For Prakas, the poetic language of John Donne, George Herbert, Richard Crashaw, John Milton, and Thomas Traherne essentially performs the office of ministry by guiding the individual towards a profound and intimate encounter with God. It enables thus a level of immediacy with the divine that the collective nature of church ceremony distracts from and, at the other end of the devotional spectrum, that the preserve of the private examination of the scriptures cannot match. For these five poet-priest figures—Prakas always appropriately reminds us of the antithesis Milton’s circumstances and antiprelatical polemic represent in this group—it is the poetic, and not the liturgical, form which succeeds in ministering to congregations of readers on and off the page. While there is little that can appear controversial in this argument and in the choice of authors, the book offers illuminating close readings of the five poets and situates them firmly in their cultural milieu, paying sensitive attention to confessional boundaries but eloquently and convincingly showing how the poems

¹ John Milton, “Sonnet XIII. To Mr H Lawes, on his Airs,” *Milton: The Complete Shorter Poems*, ed. by John Carey, 2nd edn (London: Routledge, 2006), 294-5.

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under scrutiny elude them. Offering sophisticated textual analyses and comprehensive overviews of the conditions that shaped each poet's writing, the book makes a useful contribution to studies of early modern religious verse and it will appeal to upper-level undergraduate and graduate students, as well as the wider scholarly community.

In her intention to examine how “linguistic form, particularly as it operates in poetry, is a potent communicator of spiritual experience” and to establish how it is “perhaps the most effective means of ministry” (7), Prakas adopts a New Formalist framework that in the last two decades has animated monographs on early modern religious lyric, such as Sophie Read's *Eucharist and the Poetic Imagination in Early Modern England* (2013) and Gary Kuchar's *The Poetry of Religious Sorrow in Early Modern England* (2009). The contents and structure of the book follow an established and widely accepted blueprint where each chapter is dedicated to one canonical male author (or, canonical at least in the context of seventeenth-century religious writing). The start of each chapter outlines the specific liturgical debates the author participated in or reacted against, and then each chapter in turn continues to focus on how the author employs a particular device: Donne and metaphor, Herbert and polyphony, Crashaw and fluid imagery, Milton and syntax, and Traherne and lists. There are insightful and engaging close readings throughout. The chapter on Donne, for example, focuses on the interpretative strategies of speakers and readers. It juxtaposes “A Valediction of my Name in the Window” with “The Relic” in terms of the speakers' mutual anxiety that their metaphors will be misunderstood, and it argues that this anxiety proves rewarding and liberating for readers owing to how the poems invite them to be present in the meaning-making process. Prakas then extends this attention to the centrality of the reader to Donne's sermons by suggesting that “the preacher is taking his listeners through a text, attempting with his close attention to its words to put it before their eyes” (65). The emphasis on listener as reader filters through to the next chapter on Herbert and how he “ministers to his readers by encouraging them to engage with poetic music rather than liturgical sound” (98). The conclusions Prakas reaches in these two chapters follow coherently from the textual evidence on offer, but I find they do not always do justice to (and if anything signal retreat from) important work that has placed these poets in the lively oral and aural environments of the early modern church space.

Chapter Three, on Crashaw, offers an intelligent account of the sacrament of baptism “as a structuring principle for imaging a poetic alternative that might unify

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rather than divide the Christian pious” (123). Reading variation in line formation as another example of Crashaw’s fluid poetics and his rejection of doctrinal divisions, the chapter includes an intriguing exploration of “Sancta Maria Dolorum” where we as readers are invited to “contemplate the speaker contemplating Mary” (142). Joining Mary in her grief, the reader becomes aware of their shared respective “exclusion from complete union with Christ in lines whose imagery pulls them together” (153); the poem thus paradoxically performs an inclusive gesture. The following chapter, on Milton and *Samson Agonistes*, even though not as concerned with syntax as the title might indicate, stands out as one of the most original and engaging sections in the book. Reading Samson as a failed minister is provocative and highly suggestive. Prakas’s careful reading of the tragedy in light of the ritual of Confession is very interesting and it offers persuasive answers concerning how we might interpret Samson’s final moments in the Temple as well as the corrective, ceremonial commemorations imagined by Manoa and the Chorus at the very end. “Despite its best attempts and whatever its form, poetry, like Samson himself, cannot fully escape the prelatival” (193), argues Prakas. The Coda on Traherne and his use of catalogue in “Dumbnesse” re-iterates what every chapter has come to establish: that in the problem of how to approach God, “the answer for Traherne, but also for Donne, Herbert, Crashaw, and Milton, was to seek him less in the pulpit than in poetic form” (210). Prakas’s learned and precise attention to the verse in each chapter is compelling and a key strength of the book.

Early in the introduction there is a wonderful and intriguing deviation from the rigid structure of the book where Prakas discusses the Sidney Psalter, began by Sir Philip Sidney but revised and completed by his sister, Mary Sidney after his death in 1586. In this work, according to Prakas, “Mary frames her explicit efforts to commemorate him, as well as the psalms themselves, as a kind of para-liturgy – one not possible within the church” (15). The brief section dedicated to Mary Sidney feels fresh and energising and it suggests that Prakas’s solid argument could have fruitfully expanded to include a wider, more creative selection of primary sources, such as women authors (if allowances are made for Milton not fitting the poet-priest identity, why not for others?) or clergymen who also wrote lyric in the period but never achieved the celebrity status Prakas’s poets hold in academia and beyond. The safe approach is also evident in the cautious language used throughout the book (the repetitive use of “perhaps,” for instance, is hard to ignore) and the very diplomatic engagement with

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secondary sources. Prakas's critical engagement with the scholarship is thoughtful and wide-ranging and it is certainly another of the key attributes of the study. The author takes good care to signpost her own contributions, but the language is couched in seemingly timid disagreement that detracts from a clearly articulated and original position. For instance, Prakas argues that the book "seeks to inhabit the space between the scholarly legacy of Louis K. Martz and Barbara K. Lewalski, who identified the tradition of private contemplative meditation as the dominant influence on much of the poetry considered here, and the powerful challenge to that legacy issued by Ramie Targoff" (30-31). Prakas's argument is that "the poetry covered in this book attempts to minister to readers by critically evaluating the significance of the liturgy and offering up a different, radical form of devotional counsel, using its own particular formal resources to figure a sociable relationship between the living individual and the eternal divine" (31). The point of poetry as another, more affectively and spiritually successful liturgy because of "individual intimacy with the divine" (31) does not exactly fill a gap and it reaffirms the binary of church versus the priesthood of one. This is not to say that every study should be a polemic, but it is hard to pinpoint the exact value of cautious statements such as "how text itself might perform a kind of priesthood" (33). Why are "might" and "kind" necessary in this formulation? It would have been useful to include a more definitive statement concerning what is "radical," exactly, about the form of "devotional counsel," or the ministry of the verse, as it emerges from this book.

This I found to be the main weakness with Prakas's argument and book overall: the definition of "radical verse" ultimately needed to be sharper to change completely how we think about these poets and their work. The introduction states that "radical verse is not necessarily verse produced by people whose biography actually took them outside the church (once again excepting Milton) but verse that itself tends that way in presenting poetic form rather than liturgical ritual as a space for communion with God" (26) and it dedicates the last paragraph to establish more fully what the term "radical" means: how it "might capture the functions of verse by a wider variety of individuals within that landscape" (36). The conclusion reminds us of "the kind of 'radicalism' that best defines the shared commitments of the poets in this book, commitments to an individual and personal relationship with God that may be cultivated within groups of radical separatists, but that can also stimulate the poetic agenda of those whose conformity is not in question" (210). While I sympathize with the book's premise that confessional identities are fluid and aligning verse with

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doctrinal beliefs is unhelpful, I have to take issue with stretching “radical” to the extent it is rendered meaningless, historically, politically, theologically, but (closer to Parkas’s sensibilities) poetically too. Radical credentials aside, Parkas’s book is a welcome and useful addition to studies of seventeenth-century religious writing.

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