

The Body and the Divine in Early Modernity
A panel series sponsored by the Centre for Reformation and Renaissance Studies
Victoria College – University of Toronto

The Body and the Divine in Early Modernity I: Glorifying the Senses

Panel Organizer: Marco Piana (Smith College)

Chair: Matteo Soranzo (McGill University)

Paper Proposals

1) *Richard Hooker on the ‘sensible excellencie’ of the liturgy*

Torrance Kirby (McGill University)

Duties of religion performed by whole societies of men, ought to have in them accordinge to our power, a *sensible excellencie*, correspondent to the *majestie* of him whome we worship. Yea, then are the publike duties of religion best ordered, when the militant Church doth resemble by *sensible means* ... that *hidden dignitie* and glorie wherewith the church triumphant in heaven is bewtified.

Richard Hooker affirms a conspicuously positive role for the function of sensuous faculties in religious life. Paraphrasing Dionysius the Areopagite he observes that ‘sensible things which religion hath hallowed are resemblances framed according to things spiritually understood, whereunto they serve as a hand to lead and a way to direct.’ Hooker offers a distinctive account of the tension between intellection and imagination in religious life, and a corresponding approach to the role of the senses in conversion.

Keywords: Richard Hooker, Senses, Dionysius the Areopagite, Conversion

General Discipline Area: Theology, Philosophy, History of Religion

2) *The Body, Sense Perception, and Devotion in Thomas Traherne’s Lyric*

Gina Filo (University of Oregon)

A central preoccupation in criticism of mystical poet Thomas Traherne is his representation of the self. Surprisingly, however, this has primarily been limited to his representation of the ego, rather than the body. In this paper, I demonstrate how Traherne’s concern about identity is often mediated through his ambivalent and inconsistent characterization of bodies, which are both the only way to fully participate in God’s being and yet inherently limited and limiting in their capacities for perception. For Traherne, at times the senses provide only a partial view of creation. When the body’s perceiving abilities are at their fullest, however, they are materially and metaphysically intertwined with God, the created world, and everything in it. Through his representation of bodies and their perceptive faculties, Traherne articulates a notion of self that is

simultaneously embodied and individual and yet expansive and unbounded, apart from and yet a part of God's creation.

Keywords: Thomas Traherne, Perception, Religiosity, Poetry

General Discipline Area: Literature, History of Ideas

3) Eroticizing the Spiritual: Sensual Piety in Early Modern Devotional Verse by Women

Sarah Rolfe Prodan (Stanford University)

In Italian religious verse of the sixteenth century, one notes a spiritualizing of the sensuous, on the one hand, and a sensualizing of the spiritual, on the other. If the former is evident in re-writings of Petrarch and his *Canzoniere*, the latter is discernible in poems of empathic meditation – penitential or introspective lyric compositions on the Passion, the life of Christ, the Virgin Mary, and the saints that began to flourish in the late sixteenth-century in the context of evolving practices of affective piety for which poetry, art and ekphrastic verse served as devotional instruments. In these pious compositions, one discovers not only an aestheticization of the human form, but also an eroticization of beauty and of intimate encounter. Through a close analysis of devotional verses by Isabella di Morra (pre-1546), Semidea Poggi (1623), and Francesca Turini Bufalini (1628), this paper will explore eroticization of the spiritual by women poets.

Keywords: Isabella di Morra (pre-1546), Francesca Turini Bufalini (1628); Semidea Poggi (1623); Italian poetry and spirituality; Counter-Reformation; devotional verse; empathic meditation; affective piety

General Discipline Area: Literature; History (religious, cultural)

4) Bottom's Bowels: Eros, Consumption and Conversion in A Midsummer Night's Dream

Tiffany Hoffman (Independent Scholar)

This paper approaches the construal of divine union and godly encounter through the bodily, sensory and affective modalities of lovesickness. Drawing on a range of seventeenth-century religious sermons, Reformation theological tracts, scriptural, mystical and medical writings on the sickness of love, the essay argues for the naturalization of longing as a dispositional feature of the digestive nether realm of the human body. The theological encoding of the 'digestive spirituality' of love will be applied to Shakespeare's high comedy, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, as I seek to phenomenologize Renaissance desire as a 'gut-feeling' that shapes Bottom's ecstatic encounter with the Fairy Queen and his subsequent spiritual conversion through the operations of his gastro-intestinal tract.

Keywords: Shakespeare, A Midsummer Night's Dream, Love, Digestion

General Discipline Area: Literature; History (religious, cultural)