



Sacred Heart  
UNIVERSITY

Sacred Heart University  
**DigitalCommons@SHU**

---

School of Communication and Media Arts Faculty  
Publications

Communication and Media Arts (SCMA)

---

Spring 1995

## Transfigured Rites in Seventeenth Century Poetry (Book Review)

Sidney Gottlieb

*Sacred Heart University*, [gottliebs@sacredheart.edu](mailto:gottliebs@sacredheart.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: [http://digitalcommons.sacredheart.edu/media\\_fac](http://digitalcommons.sacredheart.edu/media_fac)



Part of the [Literature in English, British Isles Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Gottlieb, Sidney. "Transfigured Rites in Seventeenth Century Poetry by A.B. Chambers" (Book Review). *Renaissance Quarterly* 48.2 (1995): 397-399.

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Communication and Media Arts (SCMA) at DigitalCommons@SHU. It has been accepted for inclusion in School of Communication and Media Arts Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@SHU. For more information, please contact [ferribyp@sacredheart.edu](mailto:ferribyp@sacredheart.edu).

among others in the circle? If the consumer's taste is self-conscious, what specific qualities of the poems give one confidence that their choices will be validated? Was taste within a given circle so homogeneous that it merely met expectations rather than made distinctions? (She avoids pursuing the breakdown of homogeneity displayed by the Skipwith MS—"not a typical Oxford collection, despite its links with King" [66].) To what extent does a poem exist in manuscript to commemorate a relationship more than to produce aesthetic pleasure? (Tangent to this question is Hobbs' most intriguing, yet unexamined, speculation: that sometimes "a poem's popularity in the manuscript verse miscellanies derived from its well-known musical setting" [103].) What does the theory of "close acquaintance" (70) between compiler and source (the author or author's family) suggest about manuscript production: were such manuscripts of privileged access meant to be exhaustive, rather than selective? (In some respects, then, one would for sociological, rather than textual, reasons want to know what poems from an exhaustive manuscript are unique. Similarly, one might be more interested in the unpublished contents of a manuscript that also contains material excerpted for print—an editorial process that she inexplicably finds "comparatively random" [148].) While it is useful to know how access to these manuscripts was afforded (Hobbs' underlying interest throughout), it is more valuable to ask why individuals chose to filter the fruits of that access.

While Mary Hobbs does issue the disclaimer that she has only "tried here to open up and indicate the possibilities so that others may carry this whole matter further" (147), she has not covered much new ground beyond confirming the need for good editions of William Strode, Thomas Randolph, and the Calfe MSS (Harley 6917/8). Upon finishing this book one can only echo its author's own lament over the inadequacies of a *DNB* entry: "one would like to know more" (95).

YALE UNIVERSITY

Randall Louis Anderson

A. B. Chambers. *Transfigured Rites in Seventeenth-Century Poetry*. Columbia and London: University of Missouri Press, 1992. xiii + 275 pp. \$39.95.

A. B. Chambers' *Transfigured Rites* is a rich and rambling meditation on the surprising variety of seventeenth-century liturgical poems. He hardly pauses to define his subject matter or introduce

his critical method. Instead, from nearly the first word of his first chapter he takes off on a series of leaps and bounds, resting for uneven intervals on poems by Donne, Herbert, Beaumont, Crashaw, Vaughan, Milton, and Herrick, among others. His chapter titles sketch out some semblance of a structure and indicate that he will examine selected liturgical sub-genres (prayers and litanies), organizing principles and techniques (such as pericopes), and events or seasons (for example, baptism, circumcision, Christmas, and Advent). But Chambers' approach is not so much deductive and sequential as it is agile and allusive. He presses various points about the general relationship between liturgy and poetry, but never lingers long on theory, history, or abstraction. Above all else, this is a book of detailed interpretive readings attempting to uncover seventeenth-century poetic processes: poetry created in the presence of liturgy and often out of liturgical materials and modes.

Part of what makes Chambers' analyses so intriguing is his constant effort to illustrate the breadth of the seventeenth-century understanding of liturgy. Liturgy is not simply a collection of texts used to establish orderly public worship: it is itself a dynamic reconfiguration of the Bible that helps turn textuality into social action, confirming the sacramental basis of human experience. Through liturgy, private and public spheres blend, without canceling one another, earthly time expands to include not only history but grace and eschatology (145), and the individual worshipper is simultaneously effaced and fulfilled in the encounter with God's apprehensible mystery. These themes are central to such poems as Donne's "Goodfriday, 1613. Riding Westward" and Milton's "On the Morning of Christ's Nativity," both of which Chambers examines extensively and brilliantly.

There are some wonderful surprises in *Transfigured Rites*, one of which is the recurrent focus on context and sequence. The Book of Common Prayer is a reshuffling of biblical materials. Chambers draws two conclusions from this. First, we must be careful to distinguish between biblical and liturgical allusions, because the same words may have significantly different meaning depending on whether they recall their context in the Bible or in the Book of Common Prayer. The term "pericope" refers specifically to a scriptural passage "appointed to be read in Church Services" (64), and Chambers uses examples from Herbert and Milton, among others, to demonstrate that recognition of a pericope, not just a biblical allusion, at the heart of a poem may resolve interpretive cruxes. Sec-

ond, we must pay more attention to how seventeenth-century poets follow liturgical models and use combinations of poems to create meaning. For years critics have examined how Herbert's poems are arranged in clusters, so much so that a substantial part of the meaning and effect of any one poem often depends upon its relationship with the others it is placed alongside or otherwise associated with. Chambers sees this as an expressive technique reinforced, if not taught, by liturgical practice, and examines at length the importance of linking patterns in not only Herbert but also Beaumont, Vaughan, Traherne, and Herrick. Indeed, Chambers' chapter on Herrick—his only chapter devoted to a single author—is a kind of *tour de force* examination of how one poet's liturgical mentality is visible not only in the individual details of the poems but in the overall shape of the highly interconnected volume.

Chambers is a remarkably skillful writer and his commentaries are knowledgeable and forceful, but his premises and approach are not unassailable. He is of course aware of how fiercely contested the role of the traditional liturgy was in the seventeenth century, but he nevertheless proceeds as though the Book of Common Prayer is inextricably and equally part of the accepted religious consciousness of all seventeenth-century poets. Herbert, however, fits better into his plan than Milton, who is in many respects deeply anti-liturgical. And even though Chambers' method seems more suitable for poets like Herbert, it downplays what may very well be idiosyncratic uses of or personal interpretations of the liturgy even by such poets as Herbert. To give him credit, Chambers certainly tries to address some ways that poets "transfigure" ritual, but he is more concerned with how liturgy transfigures them and shapes their poetry.

Finally, Chambers makes broad claims for habits of mind that he calls liturgical without carefully distinguishing between the distinctive contributions of liturgy and the ways in which liturgy is only one part, however prominent, of religious practice, doctrine, and dogma. That liturgy figures in much seventeenth-century poetry is unquestionable, and we owe a great deal to Chambers for expanding our knowledge of how liturgy provides poets with particularly adaptable themes, structural principles, and doctrinal support. But liturgy does not account for all of seventeenth-century religious poetry, or, ironically, even all that is in seventeenth-century liturgical poetry.

SACRED HEART UNIVERSITY

Sidney Gottlieb