

**“STRAIGHT AS A LINE”**

**“STRAIGHT AS A LINE”:  
SIMPLICITY IN GEORGE HERBERT’S “A WREATH”**

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**A Thesis  
Submitted to the School of Graduate Studies  
in Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements  
for the Degree  
Master of Arts**

**McMaster University**

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MASTER OF ARTS (1998)  
(English)

McMASTER UNIVERSITY  
Hamilton, Ontario

TITLE: "Straight as a Line": Simplicity in George Herbert's "A Wreath"

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NUMBER OF PAGES: vi, 76

## ABSTRACT

The popularity of the frequently anthologized pattern poems, “Easter-Wings,” and “The Altar,” is such that readers not well-versed in George Herbert’s larger body of poems could associate him solely with that genre. Although Herbert’s “A Wreath” has not been identified as a pattern poem per se, it nevertheless frequently suffers from the same dismissal that most critics apply to pattern poetry in general, that is, of being simply playful and technically quaint. This study will offer a formalist reading of “A Wreath,” to show how the poet uses existing pattern poetry forms to weave a complex garland that conceals aesthetic, devotional, and theological rewards. We will place the poem within the tradition of pattern poetry, extending its definition to include not just those poems in which the text on the printed page suggests a particular shape, but also those poems in which rhyme schemes or repeated terminal words of lines *convey* a shape — that is, poems in which the language suggests a shape not fully realized by the layout.

The form of the poem demands that we understand it within the context of existing pattern poetry forms; in order to elucidate the theological meaning, we must look to the Bible, as well as the writings of Jérôme Savonarola and Saint Augustine. By studying both the poem’s elaborate artistic form and its pious matter, this study will consider whether Herbert fulfills the poem’s stated intention of praising God.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

I should like to thank Dr. Chauncey Wood not only for his profound help and encouragement during the researching and writing of this thesis, but also for introducing me to the rich rewards of reading George Herbert;

Dr. Wood's passion for Herbert's poetry is indeed infectious.

I would also like to thank Carter Johnson, Ray Barrett, and Chris Montoni, whose belief in me and encouragement towards pursuing an M.A. were pivotal in my decision.

Finally, I cannot fail to mention my parents and brothers.

Their support to me over the years has been invaluable.

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## PREFACE

Quotations in the following text from George Herbert's poetry will be from F.E. Hutchinson's edition, *The Works of George Herbert*, with citations from poems referring to line numbers rather than page numbers. Biblical references in the following text will be taken from the *King James Bible*, and will be cited by book, chapter, and verse, appearing in parentheses following the quotation.

## INTRODUCTION

George Herbert's reputation as one of the finest poets of his age is doubtless a result of his ability to combine both a mastery of form, and a sincerity of pious expression. This synthesis of technical artistry and devout piety means that his appeal is broad: modern readers with no specific religious inclinations still appreciate his poetry for his dexterity with form, rhyme, syntax, and other poetic compositional elements, just as readers of varied theological persuasions from the complex religious climate of the seventeenth century were engrossed and delighted by his treatment of matters of Christian doctrine and faith.

Despite this time-honoured and large-scale appreciation, however, one of the unfortunate aspects of the commentary on Herbert's poetry is that apart from popular and frequently anthologized poems such as "The Altar," "The Collar," "Easter-Wings," "Love (III)," the "Affliction" series, and the two "Jordan" poems, not enough work is done on individual pieces from his collection of poetry in English, *The Temple*. As a result, there remain numerous poems that can yield fruitful rewards, given more extensive commentary; "A Wreath" is one such poem. The poem's short length (twelve lines) may account for the lack of significant commentary it has received. Either critics have convinced themselves that a poem of such brevity can hardly yield substantial discussion, or the density of the

tightly-crafted piece has proved to be too intricate and has thus been conveniently neglected. Both possibilities are damning to the practise of scholarly criticism and inexcusable; nevertheless, our focus must be the poem, and not the critics.

Rosalie E. Osmond's articulation of Herbert's two audiences — man, and God, and the respective poetics needed to address them appropriately, speaks to the very problem that confronts critics when attempting to explain "A Wreath": "In the very diverse body of Herbert's work one finds many different devices to achieve the end of a poetic that is at once simple and 'pure' insofar as it is God-directed, but persuasive and 'eloquent' in that it is also man-directed — an intention that is genuinely sincere combined with a poetic that gives the impression of sincerity, and is effective as well."<sup>1</sup> After surveying the existing commentary on "A Wreath" in Chapter One, we must try to reconcile the art of Herbert's elaborate poem as he attempts to successfully convey and resolve a particular spiritual question, that of how to appropriately praise God.

Chapter Two thus attempts to place the poem in the tradition of pattern poetry, a field whose borders are as of yet not clearly defined. By suggesting the poem's affinity with traditional forms such as the Greek *technopaigneia*, the Latin *carmina figurata*, and the German *figurengedichte*, and by extending the existing tentative definitions of what pattern poetry entails, we find that Herbert's choice of the wreath form is neither arbitrary, nor unoriginal. As Joseph Summers has noted, "Herbert, of course, no more invented the

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<sup>1</sup> Rosalie E. Osmond, "George Herbert: Richness in Austerity," *English Studies in Canada*, 6 (1980), 134.

pattern poem than he invented ‘emblematic poetry’ or the religious lyric: his originality lies in his achievement with traditional materials.”<sup>2</sup> We shall see how Herbert’s choice of the pattern poem form allows him to appropriately display and engage the reader in the act that the poet works through.

Chapter Three addresses the spiritual and theological issues that characterize “A Wreath.” The examination of the poem’s compositional elements in the second chapter is here followed by a study of the semantics of “A Wreath,” in an attempt to illuminate particular religious modes of thought that mark the poem. Particular attention will be paid to *De Simplicitate Christianae Vitae*, the devotional treatise of the fifteenth-century Dominican monk, Jérôme Savonarola, and his concept of *simplicitas*. Finally, in order to determine the success of the poem’s intention to offer a “wreath of deserved praise,” we must consider the thought of St. Augustine of Hippo, particularly his notions of grace. The sum total of the study of Herbert’s form and matter, one hopes, will help elucidate one of his finer, yet sadly neglected poems.

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<sup>2</sup> *George Herbert: His Religion & Art* (Binghamton, 1981). p.123.

### **A Wreath**

A wreathed garland of deserved praise,  
Of praise deserved, unto thee I give,  
I give to thee, who knowest all my wayes,  
My crooked winding wayes, wherein I live,  
Wherein I die, not live: for life is straight, 5  
Straight as a line, and ever tends to thee,  
To thee, who art more farre above deceit,  
Then deceit seems above simplicitie.  
Give me simplicitie, that I may live,  
So live and like, that I may know, thy wayes, 10  
Know them and practise them: then shall I give  
For this poore wreath, give thee a crown of praise.

## I. OUR CROOKED WINDING WAYES

It was not until the late 1960s that any substantial commentary on “A Wreath” appeared, and criticism since then has been sporadic and minimal. Critics have generally shied away from devoting more than a few paragraphs to the poem in book-length studies of Herbert’s work; the handful of articles that address the poem use it either as a foil to study other Elizabethan and seventeenth-century wreath poems, or as a means of comparison with other poems by Herbert. It seems that scholars of Herbert wrestle academically with the poem in a manner that is strangely akin to the way the poet no doubt wrestled with his own spiritual conflicts as he composed the piece (this is not to suggest, however, that the poet’s struggles were of less or equal importance to those of the scholars). One group of critics concern themselves primarily with Herbert’s art, that is, with figures of rhetoric, questions of rhyme scheme, syntax, and visual patterning. Other critics, although fewer in number, place their emphasis on theological concerns, the artistry being merely a necessary evil. The third group, thankfully the largest, considers a study of both form and matter to be crucial to any fruitful understanding of “A Wreath”; again, however, the number and scope of the studies to date have been far from sufficient.

Looking backwards, there has been extensive mention of the debt of “A Wreath” to the work of Robert Southwell, to Sir Philip Sidney’s Sonnet 44, and to Donne’s “La

Corona” sequence, while looking forward, critics have noted the poem’s influence on Marvell’s “The Coronet,” and Vaughan’s “The Garland” and “The Wreath.”<sup>1</sup> There have also been studies concerned with Herbert’s use of rhetoric proper. Michael Gallagher, S.J., shows Herbert’s debt to the ‘plain style’ of his times, to traditional figures of rhetoric (such as *anadiplosis*), and to the Augustinian tradition of rhetoric. Gallagher concludes that Herbert “transcends any such easy categories and traditions,”<sup>2</sup> and ultimately uses them to construct a personal and distinctive style of his own. William N. Fisher focuses specifically on the rhetorical element of *occupatio*, which works by attempting to “describe, praise, or denigrate something representative of qualities greater than or below those the artist professes to possess.... [ and works, therefore,] with the paradox of affirmation through negation.”<sup>3</sup> Fisher cites the most likely image for the *occupatio* mode as being the ‘crown of praise,’ which “must be negated — the poet is not capable of praising — or it becomes a crown of pride” (218). But although Herbert can never really weave a tight wreath of praise in the absence of God’s grace, “[i]n denying poetry’s

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<sup>1</sup> See especially Margaret Carpenter, “From Herbert to Marvell: Poetics in ‘A Wreath’ and ‘The Coronet,’” *Journal of English and Germanic Philology*, 69 (1970), 50-62; Louis Martz, *The Poetry of Meditation* (New Haven and London, 1954, rev. 1962); and Ceri Sullivan, “Seventeenth-Century Wreath Poems,” *George Herbert Journal*, 19:1-2 (1995/1996), 95-101.

<sup>2</sup> Michael P. Gallagher, S.J. “Rhetoric, Style, and George Herbert,” *A Journal of English Literary History*, 37 (1970), 516.

<sup>3</sup> William N. Fisher, “Occupatio in Sixteenth- and Seventeenth-Century Verse,” *Texas Studies in Literature and Language*, 14 (1972), 208-211.

adequacy, the poet affirms, along with his extralogical, extraverbal meaning, the poem itself,” as is suggested by the poem’s circular end-rhyme scheme.

Ted-Larry Pebworth and Claude Summers pick up on Fisher’s point, noting that even as the poet constructs the “poore wreath,” he is aware it can only become a “crown of praise” when he achieves his demand of simplicity and union with God.<sup>4</sup> However, “the distance between the ‘wreath’ and the ‘crown of praise’ is a measure not of Herbert’s failure but of his ambition; it is the distance between human possibilities and heavenly perfection” (Pebworth x).

Some of the studies have been attempts to get at the poem by highly quantitative and strictly syntactical means. George Klawitter remarks on the tonally different quatrains of the poem, “the first [being] a neutral observation on the act of making a wreath for God; the second, a rude realization that the poet may be deceiving himself; the third, a humble prayer for simplicity.”<sup>5</sup> As the repeated end-words become more singular than multiple, “the poem becomes more simple in this regard as the poet realizes his deceitfulness and begs for simplicity” (Klawitter 16-17). Using a diagram, Klawitter proposes that the poet has achieved not a single, but a double wreath, so that it looks more like “the classic garland of bays (a circle that did not touch at the forehead) than a

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<sup>4</sup> Pebworth, Ted-Larry and Claude Summers, eds., *“Too Rich to Clothe the Sunne”*: *Essays on George Herbert* (Pittsburgh, 1980).

<sup>5</sup> George Klawitter, “The Problem of Circularity in Herbert’s Wreath,” *George Herbert Journal*, 6:1 (1982), 15.

tightly circular wreath which would not, after all, be God-like: the poem says God's ways are more straight than circular. The point at which the wreath doubles back upon itself occurs exactly midway through the poem, at the use of the words 'to thee,' the repetition of which stands out in a bed of single end-word repetitions" (Klawitter 18-19).<sup>6</sup> While on the subject of tone, one must mention the work of John B. Lord, who charts the different sounds of Herbert's poems, including "A Wreath," on scientific graphs.<sup>7</sup> Although not quite as meticulously, Charles A. Huttar places "A Wreath" and the rest of Herbert's poetry within the emblematic spirit and its particular influences. Huttar's article groups Herbert's poems within various emblematic categories, influences, and styles.<sup>8</sup>

Janis Lull studies the placement of "A Wreath" in the sequence that is *The Temple*, stating that in both the Williams and Bodleian manuscripts, the poem "stands as paradox, both a reassertion of fatal pride and a redemption of the poet's earlier 'winding

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<sup>6</sup> One is reminded of the bays of "The Collar," where the speaker in the first half of the poem condemns the fruitlessness of his life: "Have I no bayes to crown it? / No flowers, no garlands gay? All blasted? / All wasted?" By contrast, the second half of the poem presents a different tone, one generated by the heart, not the head.

<sup>7</sup> John B. Lord, "Herbert's Poetic Voice," *George Herbert Journal*, 2:1-2 (1979), 25-43.

<sup>8</sup> Charles A. Huttar, "Herbert and Emblematic Tradition," *Like Season'd Timber: New Essays on George Herbert*, Ed. Edmund Miller and Robert DiYanni (New York, 1987).

waies,' his recurrent and suspicious longings to rise by his own clever works".<sup>9</sup> Lull claims that like "Easter-Wings," "A Wreath" serves as "a functionally chiasmic gateway in *The Church*. In its backward-looking pessimism, it recalls the blindness of many of Herbert's earlier personae. But in its forward-looking aspect, it is a fittingly hopeful introduction to the final sequence" (131).

Arnold Stein was one of the earliest critics to write at any length on "A Wreath." Stein is concerned primarily with the poet's use of "closed forms," and the limitations they might pose. For Stein, Herbert transcends these limitations by varying the rhythm and spacing of the repetitions in the poem, and by making some of them rhetorical and some syntactical, so that "the final effect sounds more like speech than the product of a written word game."<sup>10</sup> Stein claims that "the poet is not trying to unwind the naturally 'crooked,' though he prays for the essential thread of 'simplicitie.' He is, one might say, taking the crooked appearances on their own terms and winding them to death" (144). The progression of the poem is logical, for rather than be constrained by the art, Herbert uses the closed form for his own purpose so that ultimately, "[t]he form of the poem does not turn back on itself; it has been turning the whole time, the verbal device being conceptual, a winding with a purpose, and the purpose is to transform" (145).

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<sup>9</sup> Janis Lull, *The Poem in Time: Reading George Herbert's Revisions of The Church* (Newark, 1990). p.130.

<sup>10</sup> Arnold Stein, *George Herbert's Lyrics* (Baltimore, 1968). p.144.

According to Heather A.R. Asals, Herbert understands “it is the duty of the religious poet to return all things to their proper name in praise of God”<sup>11</sup>, so that “[d]iscovering God’s name in the operations of both world and poem is the major reflective act in the poetry of *The Temple*” (54). In “A Wreath,” then, Herbert attempts to manifest the “simplicitie” of God. In the middle of the poem, “[t]he ‘deceit’ of the many (seeming ‘above simplicitie’), demonstrating itself in the *sequence* of words in the poem’s hieroglyph, is subverted by the ‘*line*’ (the equivocal ‘line’ of poetry) that ‘ever tends to thee’”(54). The theology of “A Wreath” is also explained, albeit very simply, by George Ryley, one of the first to write on the poet. In a manuscript edited by Maureen Boyd and Cedric Brown, Ryley suggests that the poem is, “[a] song of adoration to God, in which the poet adores him like the psalmist” (Ryley also provides specific references to the Psalms), “[a] humble confession of the perverseness of his ways,” “[a] prayer for the rectification of his ways,” and “[a] vow of praise for the grace of God, if he will answer this prayer.”<sup>12</sup> In her book-length study, Sister Thekla is adamant that “[p]raise of God can not come from an effort of wit, nor of intelligence.”<sup>13</sup> The catalyst must be grace: “To

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<sup>11</sup> Heather A.R. Asals, *Equivocal Predication: George Herbert’s Way to God* (Toronto, 1981). p.52.

<sup>12</sup> George Ryley (Ed. Maureen Boyd and Cedric C. Brown), *George Ryley, Mr. Herbert’s Temple and Church Militant Explained and Improved (Bodleian MS Rawl. D. 199)* (New York and London, 1987). p.260.

<sup>13</sup> Sister Thekla, *George Herbert – Idea and Image: A Study of The Temple* (Newport, 1974). p.189.

write his poetry, he must be inspired by the Spirit, in a condition of the presence of Grace, and his poetry returns to God in the form of praise” (Thekla 190). The notion of grace is one that does not go unnoticed by other critics, many of whom observe Herbert’s recognition of its redemptive qualities.

The end of the poem is another point of contention among critics. The debate centres around the reconciliation between the human art and rhetoric of the poem, and the spiritual goals of simplicity and praise. Assuming a sufficient appreciation of the ‘wit’ or artistry of the poem, what are we to make of the ‘meaning’ of the poem itself? Upon the completion of the act of reading the poem, is the reader in fact left in the end, like Herbert’s speaker in “Prayer (I),” with “something understood”? Thus the end of the poetic wreath provides matter for debate concerning whether there is a ‘completion’ to the piece, if, in fact, the endeavor can ever be completed. If there is a completion to the wreath, then how exactly is this achieved?

Citing Stanley Fish’s commentary on “The Altar” and suggesting that it may be more applicable to “A Wreath,” Robert N. Watson doubts the existence of a completion to Herbert’s wreath:

Having his prayer carved into a sacred shape redeems it from the linear aspect of human utterances that doom them to ending, even as God’s reshaping — ‘altaring’ — of his heart will redeem the speaker from the fatally linear aspect of human life. Unlike the ordinary focus of verbal art, sculpture has no end-point; it achieves wholeness rather than extinction at the point of completion. By abjuring pride of creation, Herbert can further evade the pressures of closure. The poem seeks, not to be flawed....but to

be temporarily incomplete.<sup>14</sup>

This seems plausible enough at first glance, but one must consider that God's reshaping mortal man's heart and mortal man's carving a sacred shape are two different things.

Moreover, as we have seen, there is considerable doubt as to whether the wreath, unlike the altar, is a sacred shape after all. The wreath, as the poem seems to show, is but a "poore" human substitute for a crown.

Harold Toliver also suggests that there cannot be a proper 'completion' within the poem itself: "Just as fatal to the poet if not to the man is that knowing and practicing [God's ways] would mean the end of writing.... To arrive at the crown, the one meant here, would be to discard the wreath."<sup>15</sup> As we have often seen with Herbert, individual poems treat spiritual struggles that will recur regularly in the Christian's life. The very nature of fallen man means that he will continue to sin and seek, regardless of how many times the lesson is learned; it is in this continual searching and learning that the answer lies: "...life as lived, as opposed to life thus charted, is all complex wreathing and storied progress, as artistry winds itself into the sense. If anything takes precedence over faith and its end, it is that inescapable moment-by-moment experience. It requires renewed investigation and explaining just to determine how God's ways would work if one could

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<sup>14</sup> Robert N. Watson, *The Rest is Silence: Death as Annihilation in the English Renaissance* (Berkeley, 1994), p.384.

<sup>15</sup> Harold Toliver, *George Herbert's Christian Narrative* (University Park, 1993), p.82.

get at them” (Toliver 82). What one gets, then, at the end of the poem, is “a wreath that serves at best as a training exercise for true praise” (Toliver 83).

Similarly, Edward Veith sees the poem as being more of a means than an end. He notes the placement of “A Wreath” immediately before “Death,” a positioning which only reinforces *The Temple*’s theological structure in which sanctification is completed only at death.<sup>16</sup> According to Veith, the poem “recapitulates and images in its form the ‘double motion,’ the halting process of sanctification” (168). The continuous “two steps forward, one step backwards motion” of the poem gradually decreases until there is a definite progress made at the end of the poem. Although the ways of the speaker are crooked and winding, they nevertheless exist in time that is linear, time that gradually moves mortal man closer and closer to God. Veith shows how the syntax reflects this progress over the poem’s course. The process of sanctification involves the “growing Christian” coming not only to *know* God’s ways, but to *practice* them as well. By the end of the poem, Veith feels that there is “a definite advance: To God’s knowledge of his ways (3-4), is added his knowledge of God’s way (10-11); the ‘poore wreath’ of praise becomes a crown” (169).

Terry Sherwood is also mindful of something gained by the end of the poem. He sees some of Herbert’s poems, including “A Wreath,” as spatial frames that “‘live’ or are

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<sup>16</sup> Edward Veith, *Reformation Spirituality: The Religion of George Herbert* (Lewisburg, 1985).

‘quickened’ or become translated into motion, into living space.”<sup>17</sup> The motions that quicken the frame of “A Wreath” are really “the ironic countermotions that convert the speaker’s poetic gift from death into life” (132), so that the end of the poem proves that “the motions of life, both ‘winding’ and ‘straight,’ are relative and must be comprehended in God’s terms, not man’s” (133).

Judy Z. Kronenfeld, instead, would suggest that the speaker’s knowledge of God’s way is more than simply “added,” as Veith puts it. In one of the few efforts that devote considerable space to “A Wreath,” Kronenfeld picks up on Sister Thekla’s observations, namely, that the poem is moved along and redeemed by grace.<sup>18</sup> In fact, the poem from the very beginning is proof of the benefits already received from the exercise: “The very winding of the poem, the intertwining of the wreathed garland, the artifice, the deceit moves it from praise to the prayer that precedes praise, serves not as mere ‘trim invention,’ but as a continuous process of self-correction” (298). Kronenfeld suggests that “the poem moves from an emphasis on what he might do for God to an emphasis on what God must do for him” (299). The poem becomes not only a plea for God’s intervention, but also an offer that is practically too attractive for God to turn down: “...we can say that Herbert deals with the negative implications of wreaths by weaving a wreath that allows

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<sup>17</sup> Terry Sherwood, *Herbert’s Prayerful Art* (Toronto, 1989). p. 132.

<sup>18</sup> Judy Z. Kronenfeld, “Herbert’s ‘A Wreath’ and Devotional Aesthetics: Imperfect Efforts Redeemed by Grace,” *A Journal of English Literary History*, 48:2 (1981), 290-309.

God to also weave for His own purposes, by himself making a crown conceptually inferior to the crown God can make of him....It is not, in this case, that the poet is reduced to silence, having learned the futility of his speech, but that his imperfect saying is redeemed by grace” (303).

The most recent book-length study of the topic comes from Elizabeth Clarke, whose first chapter, “Herbert and Savonarola: The Rhetoric of Radical Simplicity,” discusses the influence of Jérôme Savonarola on Herbert, and traces his theory of *simplicitas* through “A Wreath.”<sup>19</sup> Savonarola’s theory is central to an understanding of the theology of “A Wreath”; because this study will deal with the question of *simplicitas* at length in a later chapter, we will postpone more reference to Clarke’s work until that point.

As was suggested at the beginning of this chapter, the existing critical commentary devoted solely to “A Wreath” is insufficient at best. Although many individual critics have hinted at plausible and potentially enlightening readings, these readings have been neither comprehensive nor sufficiently developed. Michael Gallagher rightly suggests that “‘Give me simplicitie, that I may live’ is the prayer of an extremely artful poem but there is no real contradiction between the simplicity and the art: they belong to two different realms” (Gallagher 507). In the following two chapters, this study will consider both the art and

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<sup>19</sup> Elizabeth Clarke, *Theory and Theology in George Herbert's Poetry: 'Divinitie, and Poesie, Met'* (Oxford, 1997).

the theology of the poem, with the aim of building on the critical work done to date and suggesting a more comprehensive reading of Herbert's "A Wreath."

## II. THE WREATHED GARLAND

“A full reading of a poem will depend upon recognition of its genre, and its version of that genre.”<sup>1</sup> Indeed much of the commentary on “A Wreath” to date has failed to place the poem in any particular genre or form, the result being that the interpretation suffers from a lack of sufficient context. A reading, for example, of T.S. Eliot’s “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” would be lacking without sufficient knowledge of the formal conventions of the dramatic monologue. Similarly, the value of any reading of Samuel Coleridge’s “Rime of the Ancient Mariner” would only be heightened by a knowledge of the conditions and social function of the ballad form. In addition, that reading would be further enhanced by a knowledge of the “lament,” particularly its use in such Old English poems as “The Wanderer” and “The Seafarer.” In the same way, readings that result from studying “A Wreath” in terms of the genre of pattern poetry heighten the poem’s effects and help illuminate its sense.

The field of pattern poetry, however, is itself largely unexplored, with varying degrees of definition and agreement existing amongst its few scholars. The term “pattern poetry” itself is believed to have originated in the nineteenth-century, along with

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<sup>1</sup> John Hollander, *Vision and Resonance: Two Senses of Poetic Form* (New York, 1975). p.247.

synonymous terms such as “figured poetry” and “visual poetry.”<sup>2</sup> Despite an increase in scholarship in the area in the past three decades, there remains a significant amount of commentary to be done; most of the work to date has involved simply documenting existing pieces and unearthing others that remain buried in libraries and private collections around the world. The relative infancy of the study of the genre means that little consensus exists not only in the definition of the term “pattern poetry,” but also in matters of criteria, form, bibliography, and hermeneutic approaches. This condition has both drawbacks and benefits. The drawbacks are obvious — conducting theoretical and hermeneutic studies of individual pieces, subgenres, genres, or even the field itself is very difficult in the absence of standards of definition and form. However, developing a workable form is not easy when new pieces are being discovered that continually challenge the standard’s limits. Nevertheless, it is prudent to offer some working definition of the term “pattern poetry” for the purposes of this study, tentative as that definition may be.

The initial temptation when approaching the field is to assume that since it is the visual aspect that separates pattern poems from purely literary ones, greater emphasis must be placed on the typographical arrangement of the lines (and letters) of the piece.<sup>3</sup> However, poems that over-privilege graphic execution are often the very same types that

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<sup>2</sup> Dick Higgins, *Pattern Poetry: Guide to an Unknown Literature* (New York, 1987). p.3. This work remains to date the most comprehensive study of the field.

<sup>3</sup> I do not use the word “literary” here to imply any standard of value of a piece, but instead to underline its existence as a non-visual written work, one that is created and perceived as a composition of words and letters, usually in verse form and with no pretensions to having visual qualities.

have contributed to an unfavorable reputation of pattern poetry in general, that is, as being manneristic, as being mere technical tricks and novelties, and as lacking substance. The stigma associated with pattern poetry is not a new one; pattern poetry faced violent attacks in every period in which it has occurred. These attacks gained force in the sixteenth century, with well-documented invectives by such critics as Gabriel Harvey and Ben Jonson, the latter of which dismissed the form as “a pair of scissors and a comb in verse.”<sup>4</sup> By the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, reaction against pattern poetry was only heightened by the extravagance of the Baroque period. In their study of the German pattern poem of the seventeenth century, or *figurengedichte*, Robert G. Warnock and Roland Folter comment on how the genre was influenced by the contemporary preoccupation with poetic and rhetorical theory. The danger, of course, is that “[a] paradoxical but seemingly axiomatic concomitant of an over-preoccupation with poetic principles is a flowering of hyperbolic forms, of mannerism.”<sup>5</sup> Together with a characteristic desire of the late Baroque period to synthesize various art forms, it is not surprising that many pattern poems came to be regarded as mere intellectual exercises in rhetorical and graphic execution, as bare novelties devoid of social and symbolic function and having little real literary value. Warnock and Folter are left to define *figurengedichte*

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<sup>4</sup> William Shepard Walsh, *Handy-book of Literary Curiosities* (Philadelphia, 1925). p.271.

<sup>5</sup> Robert G. Warnock and Roland Folter, “The German Pattern Poem: A Study in Mannerism of the Seventeenth Century,” *Festschrift für Detlev W. Schumann zum 70. Geburtstag* (München, 1970), 40.

as “visual poetical representation[s] of an actual object by either varying the length of the lines or by typographical means” (40), so that little room is left for any semantic emphasis. Consequently, despite contributions by some very genuine poets, “the very nature of the genre destined it to remain essentially a plaything of the hack versifier” (Warnock 51), or to be seen as suitable only to occasional verse written for specific events. Relatedly, pattern poetry throughout much of Europe, including England, suffered from similar dangers and criticisms.

A more accommodating and relevant definition of the term would have to regard the genre as both visual *and* literary art. Dick Higgins, generally acknowledged as one of the foremost critics in the field, offers the most sensible, albeit self-consciously tentative definition of the term. Over the past three decades, Higgins has been involved in worldwide attempts to collect and document examples of pattern poems. He offers that a pattern poem is “an intermedial poem that is literary, visual, and sometimes social in its conception, usually mimetic in its visual image, in which all of these elements are conveyors of meaning...” (Higgins 1987, 209). The importance of recognizing the intermedial nature of the poem is that it allows for the existence and value of definite literary and linguistic elements; a definition of this nature avoids the pitfalls of a view that privileges the visual over the textual. Although just as in specific cases it may be a necessary condition of the individual piece to privilege the visual element, one is also free to pay more attention to the textual in others. This prevents the possibility of certain poems being excluded from the genre, when considering them as pattern poems might aid

in elucidating their significance or sense. Therefore, it is prudent when considering pattern poetry to consider a number of determinants of value, “no one of which need predominate, some more applicable to visual aspects of the piece, some more to social or purely literary aspects, and perhaps even some to areas peculiar to the intermedium as such.”<sup>6</sup> Higgins suggests that pattern poetry “may mix media, in which case one can separate the two, or it may represent a conceptual fusion, in which case it is truly intermedial” (Higgins 1987, 206). This study suggests that Herbert’s “A Wreath” represents such a conceptual fusion, which we will examine later.

Not surprisingly, the lack of consensus concerning the definition of pattern poetry extends also to the various subgenres and terms associated with the field. The lack of a standard vocabulary for critics to use is another stumbling block in the effort to generate sufficient criticism and hermeneutic approaches to studying pattern poetry. As it stands, George Herbert’s “A Wreath” shares characteristics with the *bildreim*, *cancrizan*, *carmina figurata*, *figurengedichte*, *technopaignia*, *versus cancrini*, and, to an extent, shaped poems. For this study, the forms most important to consider in the context of “A Wreath” are the Greek *technopaignia*, the Latin *carmen figurata*, and the German *bildreim/figurengedichte*.

Fortunately, there are some facts of which scholars are certain. Pattern poetry has existed for much longer than is generally assumed, and is far more widespread than is

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<sup>6</sup> Dick Higgins, “Pattern Poetry as Paradigm,” *Poetics Today* 10:2 (Summer 1989), 406.

generally believed. Examples of the form can be found in numerous countries in both Western and Eastern cultures. The earliest known examples of pattern poems are a group of six Hellenistic Greek pieces that were composed between 325 B.C. and A.D. 200 (Higgins 1987, 5). They include two poems shaped as altars, an egg, a pair of wings, an axe, and a syrinx, and are contained in a tenth or eleventh century compilation called the *Greek Anthology*.<sup>7</sup> There is strong reason to believe that George Herbert knew them well;<sup>8</sup> indeed some of them serve as very plausible influences for Herbert's two famous pattern poems, "Easter-Wings" and "The Altar."<sup>9</sup> Herbert would almost certainly have read Puttenham's<sup>10</sup> *The Arte of English Poesie* (c.1587), which suggests fifteen shapes as suitable for pattern poems, including those of the Hellenistic pieces found in the *Greek*

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<sup>7</sup> Jeremy Adler cites the first printing of the *Anthology* as being in 1494, with frequent re-printings thereafter ( "*Technopaigneia, carmina figurata* and *Bilder-Reime*: Seventeenth-century Figured Poetry in Historical Perspective," *Comparative Criticism: A Yearbook*. Cambridge, 1982: 107-147).

<sup>8</sup> See Dick Higgins, *George Herbert's Pattern Poems: In Their Tradition* (West Glover, 1977); and Joseph Summers, *George Herbert: His Religion & Art* (Binghamton, 1981), p.226.

<sup>9</sup> Indeed "Easter-Wings" and "The Altar" may very well be two of *the* most famous pattern poems, and much commentary has been written on them. Surprisingly, though, hardly any work has been done to place any other of Herbert's approximately 170 poems in this genre, despite the widely-accepted view of him as one of the foremost pattern poets ever (it is, of course, absurd to suggest that Herbert is *simply* a pattern poet and nothing else). It is the hope of this study to suggest there are real rewards in reading "A Wreath" as a pattern poem. Other Herbert poems that may be read in the context of pattern poetry are "Aaron," "The Call," "The Church-Floore," "Clasping of Hands," "The Collar," "Coloss.3.3.," "Sinnes Round," and "Trinitie Sunday".

<sup>10</sup> Higgins points to the existence of some controversy as to whether the book was authored by George or Richard Puttenham (1987, 95-96). The answer to that debate is nevertheless inconsequential to this particular study.

*Anthology*. Puttenham's influence not only highlights but also partly accounts for the "formal conservatism" of much of the British pattern poetry of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, where almost none of the poems are in unique shapes, and most imitate the shapes of either the Greek models or those found in Puttenham's work (Higgins 1987, 11, 95-96).

Generally speaking, the Hellenistic pieces were shaped into a picture or image by lengthening and shortening the line lengths in patterns: "The meaning of the text was summed up in an image. The appearance of the poem arranged in such a manner gave it a visual dimension, which embellished its often abstract sense expressed verbally."<sup>11</sup> It is believed that many of these poems were composed to be inscribed on objects. Mosher calls this process and type of poetry *technopaigneia*. Jeremy Adler, however, observes that in the *technopaigneia*, "language is central. They are not pictures in any legitimate sense. The outlines represent objects, but recognition of [those objects]...depends on a knowledge of the text" (109). He contends that "[a]lthough the texts followed iconic principles to establish a general shape, iconicity was not their sole purpose" (109). As we have seen, there remains to be agreement on the definitions of terms such as *technopaigneia*. While Mosher seems to privilege the typographical arrangement of lines in the *technopaigneia*, Adler identifies the centrality of language, and Higgins adds that the term was used "at least through the seventeenth century to apply to *any* display of

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<sup>11</sup> Nicole Mosher, "The Message in Renaissance Visual Poetry," *The Language Quarterly* 29:1-2 (Winter-Spring 1991), 66.

technical virtuosity in a poem, not necessarily to visual pieces" (1987, 25).

In light of this, it would not be absurd to point out the similarities of "A Wreath" with the *technopaigneia*. In this particular piece, the title replaces the function of the printed form. Therefore, while the text itself may not be arranged in any explicit wreath form, the title suggests, or even announces the iconic image to the reader.<sup>12</sup> In addition, the poem's circular rhyme scheme also conveys that particular shape to the reader, and is an example of how "[c]omplex stanza forms may evoke meaningful shapes, even in poems not overly patterned" (Adler 147). Herbert's dexterity with the form is especially admirable when one compares his piece to other *technopaigneia* that use the wreath as their iconic framework. Two useful means of comparison are pieces from the middle to late seventeenth century, namely Birken's "Garland," and Nikolaus Peucker's "Bridal-Wreath." Although they are not English<sup>13</sup>, and there is no concrete evidence to suggest that Herbert may have seen these pieces (in fact it seems unlikely that he would have), it is beneficial to study how our poet fares in a project of a similar nature to that of other

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<sup>12</sup> In *Vision and Resonance: Two Senses of Poetic Form* (New York, 1975), John Hollander devotes a chapter to examining the "theory of titles." Hollander rightly remarks that Herbert's titles, "like his forms, are amazingly radical, in that their expressive character is in each case part of the poem's fiction" (223). They can often also be highly connotative, so that they get "turned over and over to exhibit many of their facets of potential figurativeness" (224).

<sup>13</sup> The fact that these two poems are German allows them to be also termed as *bildreim* or *figurengedichte*, instead of *technopaigneia*. As is the case with these two examples, most German pattern poems were written as occasional verse. The importance of the *bildreim* to this study lies in their sheer number; there are more existing German pattern poems than from any other language or nation. Higgins cites the wreath as a "typical shape" for the *bildreim*.

independent poets. While many poets attempted pieces that were either based on or derived from structures found in the *Greek Anthology*, there were many that attempted more complex structures. The wreath is one such structure.

The first is a piece of occasional verse written by Sigmund von Birken to commemorate the founding of the Society of Shepherds, also called the Pegnitz Order, or the 'Flower Order' (Adler 130). The poem is shaped in the form of a wreath, with the middle verses numbered according to the way they are to be read. These middle verses are separated from each other by another wreath of flowers, in this case, not letters, but actual pictures (See Fig. 1).

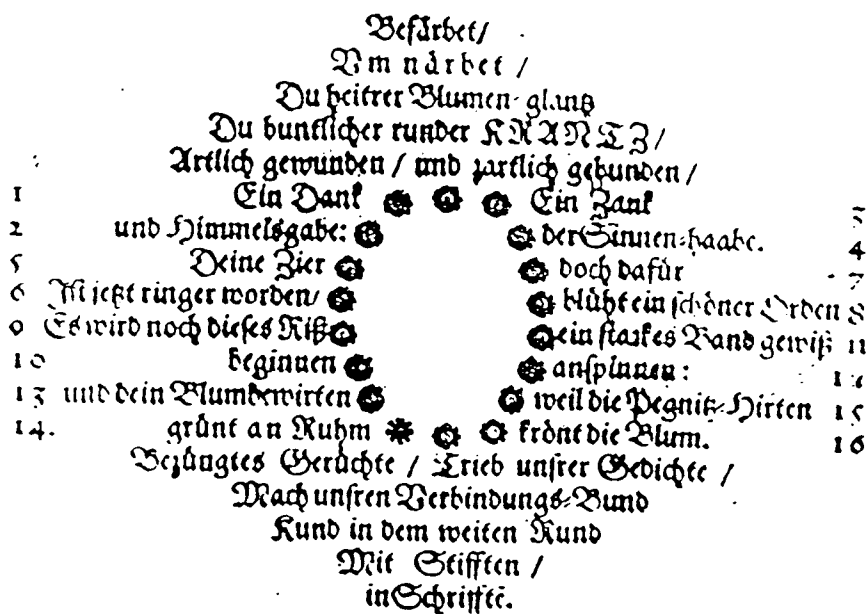


Fig. 1. SIGMUND VON BIRKEN, *Fortsetzung Der Pegnitz-Schäfersrey*  
Nürnberg: Wolfgang Endter, 1645. Reprinted from Warnock, Robert G. and Roland Folter, "The German Pattern Poem: A Study in Mannerism of the Seventeenth Century," *Festschrift für Detlev W. Schumann zum 70. Geburtstag*. Ed. Albert R. Schmitt. München: Delp, 1970. 40-73.

The second example is a bridal-wreath by Nikolaus Peucker, dating from 1702.

The interesting difference between Peucker's and Birken's wreaths is that the shape of Peucker's wreath is achieved not by the typographical arrangement of the lines, but instead by the deliberate organization of the strophes (*See Fig. 2*).

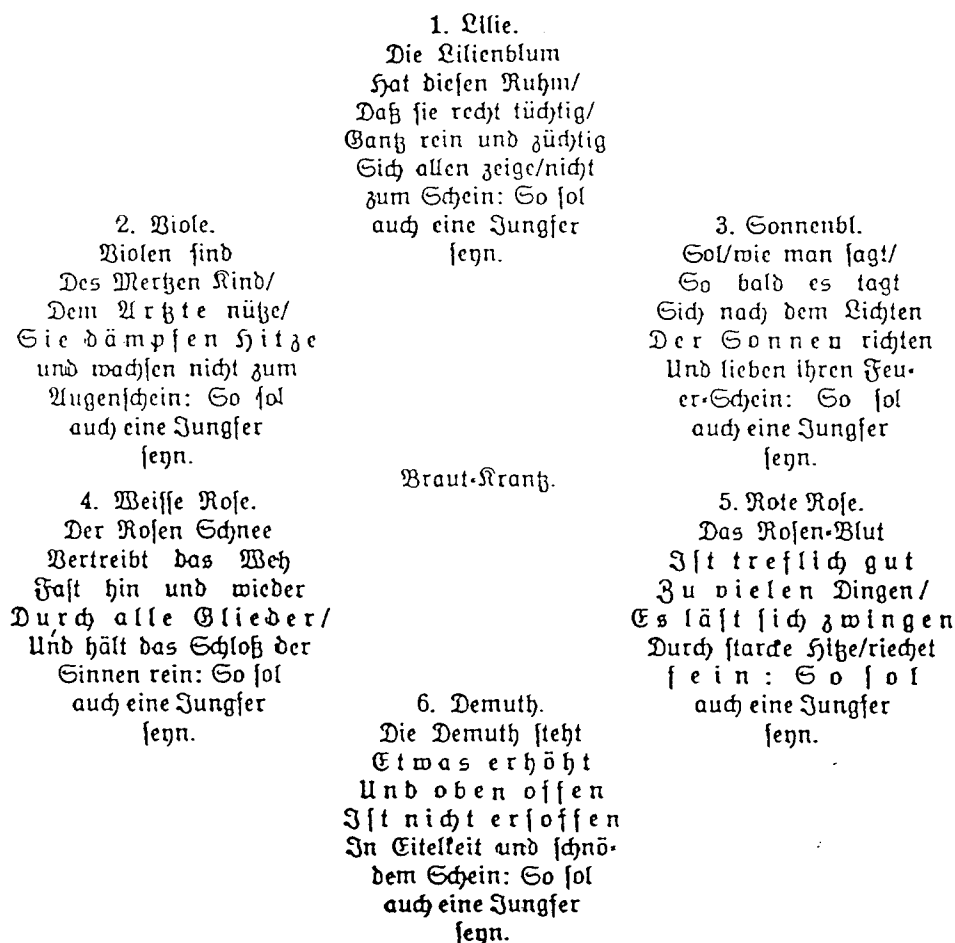


Fig. 2. NIKOLAUS PEUCKER, *Wolklingende, lustige Paucke*  
Des berühmten Collnischen Poeten / ...wolklingende / lustige Paucke.... Berlin: Otto Christian  
Pfeffer, 1702. Reprinted from Warnock, Robert G. and Roland Folter, "The German Pattern  
Poem: A Study in Mannerism of the Seventeenth Century," *Festschrift für Detlev W. Schumann*  
zum 70. Geburtstag. Ed. Albert R. Schmitt. München: Delp, 1970. 40-73.

Interestingly, both pieces boldly announce their iconic image; in Birken's composition, the word 'wreath' is highlighted in upper-case letters four lines from the beginning, and of course the poem is titled as such. In Peucker's piece, the six strophes circle the word *Braut-Krantz*, or "bridal-wreath." As mentioned before, Herbert does not rely on any typographical arrangement of lines to convey the shape; the text itself does this, aided by the title. Birken and Peucker obviously felt it necessary to both arrange the text graphically and state the image in words in order to assure that the correct icon is realized. Birken's "Wreath," when translated in English (*See Fig. 3*), has some additional characteristics that may be compared with Herbert's wreath.

	O colour,		
	You healer,		
	You cheerful blossom-sheaf,		
	Round gleaming WREATH;		
	Artfully wound, and tenderly bound,		
1	A gift	A rift	3
2	And heavenly thanks,	Of the senses' banks.	4
5	Your beauty	But from thee	7
6	Has now grown smaller,	Blooms a lovely Order.	8
9	Before long this breach	A sure band of speech	11
10	Will begin	To spin,	12
13	Till your greenery reign	When Pegnitz Shepherd-play	15
14	In blossoming fame	Crowns the bouquet.	16
	Finely tongued <i>Fama</i> , source of our songs,		
	Let the name of our union-band		
	Shine through the land		
	By delighting		
	In writing.		

Fig. 3. SIGMUND VON BIRKEN, *Fortsetzung Der Pegnitz-Schäfferey*  
Translated by Jeremy Adler, and reprinted from Adler, Jeremy, "Technopaigneia, carmina figurata and Bilder-Reime: Seventeenth-century Figured Poetry in Historical Perspective," *Comparative Criticism: A Yearbook*. Cambridge, 1982: 107-147

Birken's speaker makes conscious assertions about the craftsmanship involved in producing a successful wreath, speaking of it as being "Artfully wound, and tenderly

bound". The rhyme scheme and line order of the middle section of the poem, like Herbert's "Wreath," also appear crucial to the sense of the poem. The interior wreath that separates the verses in the middle of the poem serves to create unity and harmony. The first two lines introduce the "gift / And heavenly thanks" that are contrasted by the "rift / Of the senses' banks" on the other side of the interior wreath. In the next two lines, our discovery of the diminishment of the wreath's beauty is comforted by the knowledge that it is also the source of a new beginning, the "lovely" Pegnitz Order. Lines 9 and 10 warn of the imminent end of the interior wreath, an end that will usher in a new "band of speech."<sup>14</sup> In line 16, the wreath/bouquet, representing the new society, is *crowned* by the verbal and linguistic expression of the shepherds. The piece is both an expression of celebration and a humble request for renown, whereas Herbert's wreath is at once both an expression of praise and a humble request for simplicity and the knowledge of God's ways.

Besides the *technopaigneia*, "A Wreath" must also be considered in the context of the *carmina figurata* form. The Latin term translates literally to "figured poem(s)," and not surprisingly, there is some debate as to a standard definition. Although Higgins defines

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<sup>14</sup> Presumably, this new avenue of communication refers to the new friendship between Harsdörffer and Klaj, who were involved in a poetic contest. In the literary-historical account, the two poets compromise, at which time the "Flower Order" is formed, and Harsdörffer composes a "Garland" poem. According to Adler, "the society seems to begin at the precise moment when Harsdörffer creates an image of the garland. Only by transforming the event into a visible image does the poet fully achieve the new reality. Allegorically, the flowers represent the Shepherds, the garland the society, and the greenery the growth of its fame" (131).

it in his glossary simply as the Latin word for pattern poems (Higgins 1987, 230), others, like Ulrich Ernst, apply a more limiting set of principles to the form. In “The Figured Poem: Towards a Definition of Genre,” Ernst offers a *“poetological analysis of the genre of pattern poetry...which distinguishes among various forms of picture text composition, and attempts to classify the various sorts of carmina figurata typologically while dealing with the question of continuity and discontinuity of figured poems in ancient, medieval, and modern times.”*<sup>15</sup> Ernst’s abstract, however, promises more than can be currently delivered in the present condition of the field. The very instability of terminology in the area is highlighted by Ernst’s use of the terms “pattern poems” and “figured poems” almost interchangeably in his attempt to define the *carmina figurata*. Nevertheless, his criteria for the Latin expression are useful here, simply because they serve as a good example of other critics’ understanding of the term:

The figured poem is... constructed in such a way that the words — sometimes with the help of purely pictorial means — form a graphic figure which in relation to the verbal utterance has both a mimetic and symbolic function.... The figured poem [does not]... either wholly or partially replace linguistic units with pictures which the reader then has to decode conceptually, but creates a single picture or complex of pictures either solely or primarily by arranging the written text. (9-11)

For a typical example, one might consider the work of the Carolingian poet, Raban Maur. Maur inserts red letters in his poems to intensify the appearance of specific text on the page; the result is that the contrast between the red and black letters together with the

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<sup>15</sup> Ulrich Ernst, “The Figured Poem: Towards a Definition of Genre,” *Visible Language* 20:1 (Winter 1986), 8.

unusual arrangement of specific letters submits a reading of the poem's content to an interrupted rhythm (Mosher 67). In his criteria, however, Ernst is quick to point out the difference between poet and painter: "In the figured poem the text manifestly takes precedence over its configuration — we are dealing with a *poetic* genre, not a genre of fine art" (11). Admirable as his effort to clearly delineate the form may be, Ernst's prescriptions and proscriptions are too rigid. At best, the five types of figured poems he describes may be considered as basic forms from which there are many derivatives and hybrids.

One of the earliest and most important groups of *carmina figurata* are the twenty-one pieces of Publilius Optatianus Porfyrius, during the reign of Constantine.<sup>16</sup> With the *carmina figurata*, Porfyrius and other poets of the Middle Ages replaced the playfulness of the *technopaigneia* with "profound seriousness" (Adler 110-111). Again, the arrangement of the letters and the special emphasis given to specific letters to form words, suggests that "[t]he painted manuscript is the key vehicle of meaning, and the text *is* the picture" (Adler 113). Herbert's debt to Porfyrius and the *carmina figurata* is of a more thematic than formal nature. In No. XIV, for example, the arrangement of the letters thematically unites personal, religious, and imperial motifs to celebrate Constantine and connect him with the Son of God (See Fig. 4). Adler remarks that Porfyrius made *carmina figurata* a fit medium for Christianity and religious poetry, such that "the poem's

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<sup>16</sup> Publilius Optatianus Porfyrius, *Carmina*, Ed. Elsa Kluge. (Leipzig, 1926); and *Publili Optatiani Porfyrii Carmina*. Ed. Giovanni Polara. (Torino, 1973). 2v.

S A N C T E D E C V S M V N D I A C R E R V M S V M M A S A L V T I S  
 I V X P I A T E R R A R V M T E S O L O P R I N C I P E S A E C L I S  
 I N M E N S V M Q A V D E R E H O N I S D A T V R A V R E A V E N I T  
 S V M M O N I K S A D E O F V S I S P A T E R A L M E T Y R A N N I S  
 I V S T I T I A I N T E R R A S E T G L O R I A C A N D I D A V E R I  
 T E Q V E D V C E M A G E G R A T A F I D E S E T I V R A R E N A T A  
 T O T A Q V E P P E R C V L S I S I N G E N T I M O L E T V R A N N I S  
 A S P E R A V I S P O S I T A E S T R E L L I B E S I T A L A I V R E  
 R C E P T R A D A B I T P O P V L I S V O T O P I V S O R B I S E O I  
 A V Q V S T E I N V I C T A S M V N D I T R A N S E B I S I N O R A S  
 T E Q V E S V P L E X T O T I S D V C I B V S T I P A T A S Y E N E  
 O R A T I V R A C V P I T L V C I S S I R I G A V D I A N O S T R A E  
 O P T A T A M A T F A L L A X E N P E R F I D A T E L A F V G A R V M  
 P A R T H V S D E P O S V I T R V I T O R I S V N D I Q V E R V H R I  
 L I T O R I S A E T H E R I O E N V T V C E R T A M I N E A M O R I S  
 M E D V S A R A U S M O X O M N I S O V A T L A V D A R E S E R E N I  
 O R I S L V S T R A T V I D A T V E R I S S A N C T E T R O P A E I S  
 H A E C M A G E F E L I C E S T I T V L O S V T V I N C A S A M O R E  
 A V R E A P E R P E T V O R E S T A V R A N S S A E C V L A M V N D O  
 I N D V S E T A V R O R A E M I L E S Q V O S F L V M I N E N I L V S  
 T A N G I T F E C V N D I S V E N T V R V S P R V G I F E R V N D I K  
 O R A N T E S P I A I V R A P E T E N T G E N S N O B I L I S O R T V  
 A E T H I O P E S C V N C T I P A R E N T O P T A T A Q V E M V N D I  
 T E M P O R A L A E T A D E D I T N O B I S F E L I C I T A S A E V I  
 E N S V P L I C E S P E R S A E I V R A S I B I R E G I A N O L V N T  
 T E D O M I N V M M A L V N T F V S I T V A S E M P E R A D O R A N T  
 O R A S V I S C V P I V N T T O T I S T I B I C E D E R E R E G N I S  
 T V P I V S E T I V S T I V E R E M E M O R I N C L Y T E L A E T I S  
 D A R E S P O N S A B O N O S E M P E R M I T I S S I M V S O R B I S  
 I M P E R T I R E T V V M C L E M E N T E R E T A D D I T O N V M E N  
 S I N T M A G E F E L I C E S P A R I T E R Q V O S A L M E T V E R E  
 E T R E P A R A T A I V G A N S M A E S T I D I V O R T I A M V N D I  
 O R B E S I V N G E P A R E R D E T L E G E S R O M A V O L E N T I S  
 P R I N C I P E T E I N P O P V L O R M I T I F E L I C I V R A E V O  
 O M N I A L A E T E N T V R F L O R E N T I B V S A V R E A R E B V S

*Versus intexti* Summi dei auxilio nutuque perpetuo tutus  
 orbem totum pecavit trucidatis tyrannis  
 Constantinus pius et aeternus imperator,  
 reparator orbis.

Fig. 4. PUBLILIUS OPTATIANUS PORFYRIUS, *Carmen*, No. XIV  
*Carmina*. Ed. Elsa Kluge. Leipzig, 1926. Reprinted from Adler, Jeremy, "Technopaignia,  
*carmina figurata* and *Bilder-Reime*: Seventeenth-century Figured Poetry in Historical  
 Perspective," *Comparative Criticism: A Yearbook*. Cambridge, 1982: 107-147

meaningful shape reflected the significant order of God's universe" (Adler 111). Naming Herbert as "the poet most closely associated with *carmina figurata*," William A. Quinn suggests that in the case of poets that are particularly innovative and dexterous with form, such as George Herbert and Gerard Manley Hopkins, it is prudent to "extend the conventional definition of *carmen figuratum* to include patterning devices other than the most obvious one of typographical manipulation."<sup>17</sup> In "'The Windhover' as *Carmen Figuratum*," Quinn demonstrates strong echoes of Herbert's style and individual poems, particularly "Easter-Wings." Specific poems by Hopkins and Herbert may be read as *carmina figurata* for their ability to "translate religious experience into the tangible and visible imagery of human life."<sup>18</sup> Quinn shows how an absence of any explicit typographical format does not necessarily deny the existence of a discernible pattern in "The Windhover," which "exploit[s] aural as well as visual patterns; its syntax, rhythm, rhyme and the simple placement of compositional elements within the frame of this sonnet also seem to serve Hopkins as patterning devices. In short, anything but the actual semantic content of the sonnet can be considered a potentially symbolic feature of its inherent design" (Quinn 128). A similar examination of Herbert's "A Wreath" reveals the same patterning devices at work.

The most obvious patterning device in Herbert's "A Wreath" that conveys the

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<sup>17</sup> "'The Windhover' as *Carmen Figuratum*," *The Hopkins Quarterly* 10:4 (Winter 1984), 130.

<sup>18</sup> Ifor Evans, *English Poetry in the Later Nineteenth Century* (London, 1885). p.284.

poem's shape is the circular rhyme scheme. The poem may be divided into four quatrains, and follows an "ABAB — CDCD — BABA" rhyme scheme. The end rhyme words of the last quatrain are the same as those of the first quatrain, simply reversed: "praise-give-ways-live / live-ways-give praise." When initially perceived, the inversion suggests to the reader that the poem has come full circle at the end. In addition to the end-rhyme words, Herbert creates the appearance of a tightly woven wreath by repeating certain key words within the poem (praise, give, ways, live, straight, deceit, simplicitie), and by repeating the end-phrase of one line at the beginning of the next, with a subtle re-positioning of the words (of deserved praise, / Of praise deserved, unto thee I give, / I give to thee).<sup>19</sup> Unlike many *technopaignia*, however, this poem is not limited or constrained by its form.

A close reading of the poem reveals that it is not in fact a tightly woven wreath. The first quatrain involves the speaker's offer of a wreath of praise to God, who "knoweth all [his] ways" (4).<sup>20</sup> The second quatrain is defined by the "crooked winding ways" of the first; the speaker is beginning to come to terms with the true nature of his life and

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<sup>19</sup> Herbert is using the classical rhetorical figures of *anadiplosis* and *antimetabole* here, which involve repeating the last word(s) of one line at the beginning of the next (praise / Of praise), and repeating two or more words in inverse order (deserved praise / praise deserved), respectively. Brian Vickers provides a useful treatment of these figures and others in *Classical Rhetoric in English Poetry* (New York, 1970).

<sup>20</sup> While it is often necessary to distinguish between the "speaker" of a poem and the "poet," it is the opinion of this study that the unique nature of "A Wreath" allows one to consider its poet as the speaker, and vice-versa, and as such, this study will use those two terms interchangeably when discussing "A Wreath."

“wayes” in relation to those of God. The final quatrain is molded by a humble prayer for simplicity, upon whose reception the speaker will offer not a wreath, but a “crown of praise” (12). Herbert’s syntax and use of rhetoric in turn reflects the thematic movement of these quatrains. As the poem progresses, the formal repetition gets looser, until the final line, where the “poore wreath” is replaced by a “crown of praise.” The speaker corrects himself from the third line to the fourth line, so that “my wayes” is qualified by the rhetorical principle of ‘repetition and insertion’ to become “My crooked winding wayes” (Vickers 164). This process of self-correction continues into the next line, as the speaker reflects on the spiritual deadness of life on earth, “wherein I live, / Wherein I die, not live: for life is straight, / Straight as a line, and ever tends to thee” (4-6). By using the rhetorical figure of *polyptoton*, that is, by repeating a word in a different form but from the same root, Herbert places greater emphasis on the contrast between the speaker’s present condition of merely “living,” and the possibility of having (a) “life” given the simplicity and knowledge of God’s ways. In the third quatrain, Herbert uses *auxesis* in arranging the three verbs, “live,” “like,” and “know,” in the service of the same object, “thy wayes,” so that an ascending order of importance is achieved that climaxes at the speaker’s achievement of knowledge. However, this emphasis on knowledge is further superseded by the speaker’s desire not just to know God’s ways, but to practice them as well (Vickers 165). According to Harold Toliver, “To know and like God’s ways and yet not practice them amounts to rejecting them” (82).

Kathleen Lea studies the rhetorical effects of repetition in poetry, including that of

George Herbert, and regards repetition as “an ‘ornament of poetry’, understanding ornament by Johnson’s definition as admitting of use though excluding necessity.”<sup>21</sup> If used scrupulously, the numerous “modes of control, the ingenious variations, the nice spacing, the palpable aptness, [and] the sensitive deviation from a pattern set up” can successfully alert and guide the reader’s perception of the poem. Indeed, Lea cites shaping and persuasion as twin functions of repetition. We have already studied how Herbert uses reversed end-rhyme words and interior repetitions to convey the shape of the poem. It is not inconceivable to consider Herbert’s use of repetition to persuade as well. One may debate the issue of whether Herbert intended some or all of his poems as public or “private ejaculations.” If they are seen as public, the aim of persuading others is an obvious possibility. If we contend that they were written simply as private pieces, we must consider the question of why Herbert would have chosen to attempt “A Wreath” and other pattern poems, where the visual and conceptual art must surely necessitate an audience. Even if we accept them as private pieces, it is quite possible that they were written as personal “exercises,” where Herbert the poet must use his medium to instruct and assist Herbert the Christian.

Lea suggests a few indicators of repetition being used to effect persuasion, at least two of which are observable in Herbert’s “A Wreath.” These indicators often involve some slight shift in the syntax or grammar of the poem. The first indicator has already

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<sup>21</sup> “The Poetic Powers of Repetition,” *Proceedings of the British Academy* 55 (1969), 65.

been shown to exist in “A Wreath” — the order of words in a phrase is changed. Besides the examples of *anadiplosis* and *antimetabole*, there are other subtle variations. At the beginning of the second quatrain, Herbert’s employment of an eye-rhyme between “life” and “line” subtly suggests their connection in the context of the speaker’s growing discovery of the path to God: “Wherein I die, not live: for life is straight, / Straight as a line, and ever tends to thee” (5-6). A glance at the second half of the fifth line, followed by one directed at the first half of the sixth line, reassuringly guides the reader to make the connection of life and the line to God being similar, and additionally, simple. Herbert’s skill with rhyme and syntax is such that the end words of the middle quatrain summarize perfectly the content within. “[T]hee” at the end of the sixth line comes directly after “straight” at the end of the fifth line. This mirrors the straight-line direction of life that “ever tends to” God. Moreover, just as God is described as being “farre above deceit, / Then deceit seems above simplicitie,” likewise the end-word “thee” of the sixth line is placed above “deceit” of the seventh line, which in turn appears above “simplicitie.” Lea also makes a case for the use of a change of tense in the poetic attempt to persuade using repetition. The first quatrain of “A Wreath” employs the present indicative as the speaker offers his wreath of praise and posits his life in the “crooked winding wayes” (“unto thee I give, / I give to thee,” “wherein I live”). In the second quatrain, as he comes to terms with the impotency of his wreath in the face of God’s greatness and simplicity, he uses what we may call the eternal present (“ever tends to thee,” “who art”). In the final lines, after realizing his deficiency, his offer turns to a request. In order to be capable of offering God

the more suitable “crown” instead of the “poore wreath,” he must have simplicity and grace. The introduction of need and condition to the offering is reflected in the change of tense, to the future: “may live,” “So live,” “may know,” and finally, “shall give” (Stein 144). The poetic use of repetition to persuade and shape, therefore, seems just as “distinguished” and “supreme” in “A Wreath” as it does in other Herbert poems that have received Lea’s admiration.

One can also weigh the relative importance of each quatrain by measuring the degree of repetition and qualification in each unit. In the first four lines, we have definite instances of *anadiplosis* and *antimetabole*, and there is the ‘repetition and insertion’ of “My crooked winding wayes.” Likewise, the final quatrain is characterized by the self-correction and qualification gained through the use of *anadiplosis* and *auxesis*. The middle quatrain, however, apart from the repetition of “straight,” “to thee,” and “deceit,” contains relatively little use of the classical rhetoric figures. Moreover, as the quatrain extols the value of “simplicitie” and the directness of the path to God, so too does the word choice reflect the need for clarity: “...for life is straight, / Straight as a line, and ever tends to thee, / To thee, who art more farre above deceit, / Then deceit seems above simplicitie” (5b-8). Where the first quatrain contained seven multisyllabic words (“wreathed,” “garland,” “deserved,” “knoweth,” “crooked,” “winding,” “wherein”), the second quatrain has only three (“above,” “deceit,” “simplicitie”). The final quatrain contains only one: “practise.”<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> It seems only sensible in a poem of so many repetitions to count multisyllabic words only once for this kind of analysis. Therefore I include the “simplicitie” of l.9a in the second quatrain’s count, just as the “wherein” of l.5b is included in the first quatrain’s

As the speaker becomes more aware of the necessity of simplicity, the wreath not only gets progressively looser, but at the same time tighter and more succinct. Of the seven multisyllabic words in the first quatrain, at least four are of lesser importance (the exceptions being, in my opinion, “garland,” “knoweth,” and “winding”). By the second quatrain, two of three can be identified as central to the poem’s experience (“deceit” and “simplicitie”), until the final quatrain, where only one multisyllabic word (“practise”) is found.

The movement or path of the poem as wreath also deserves consideration when judging the choice of the particular icon. Given the title and the nature of the rhyme scheme, why does Herbert not give us a tightly woven wreath? For an answer, we must turn our attention to how Herbert treats the winding motion in his other poems, and Plato’s geometric analogy of the three motions of the soul (circular/divine, spiral/human, and rectilinear/animal).<sup>23</sup> When Herbert uses the word “winde” or “winding” in other poems, he usually rejects it as negative or associated with sin. In “Jordan (I),” the poet chastises conventional love poetry and its clichés, pretensions, and artistic pomposity, asking, “Is all good structure in a winding stair?” (3). In “Jordan (II),” he remembers his propensity for technical display and flowery language, noting, “As flames do work and winde, when they ascend, / So did I weave my self into the sense” (13-14). In

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count.

<sup>23</sup> For a more detailed discussion of how these three motions work in Herbert’s poetry, see Thomas Ramsey Watson, “God’s Geometry: Motion in the English Poetry of George Herbert,” *George Herbert Journal* 9:1 (1985), 17-25.

“Confession,” he describes how God’s afflictions “work and winde” into man’s heart, while in “The World,” *Sinne* is described as “Working and winding slily evermore” (13) into the “stately house” that *Love* built. The end of the latter poem has *Love*, *Grace*, and *Glorie* triumph over *Sinne* and *Death* to build “a braver Palace than before” (20). In one instance where “winde” and “winding” is used in a positive sense, there is nevertheless the need for divine intervention if the poet’s wish must come true. In “The Starre,” the speaker entreats a star from heaven to get him a station there, “That so among the rest [he] may / Glitter, and curle, and winde as they: / That winding is their fashion / Of adoration” (25-28). The sum total of these usages intimates to the reader that not only will the word “winding” not be used positively in “A Wreath,” but also that the motion itself cannot result in good when used by the poet, who is, after all, human; hence, the loosely woven wreath of the poem.

In Plato’s geometric analogy of the three motions of the soul, although the soul’s spiral motion has elements of the circular nature of the soul’s divine movement, it will always end in destructive cycles of sin if not checked by God’s grace, which centers that motion of humanity on Himself. Using “Sinnes Round” as an example, Watson shows how “[s]uch motion, rather than spiralling to God, builds towers of Babel (each a combination of linear motion upward, twisted into circularity) in individual lives that echo through the time line the biblical Tower of Babel, antitype of sinful behavior that, if not repented, leads to Hell” (19). Herbert repeats this notion in “The Flower”: “But while I grow in a straight line, / Still upwards bent, as if heav’n were mine own, / Thy anger comes, and I decline”

(29-31). With this in mind, Herbert cannot weave a tight wreath, and as such the use of the circular rhyme scheme serves merely to give the *appearance* of a tightly woven wreath.

This paradoxical idea of the poem turning back on itself in order to *affirm* itself is a common rhetorical device used by poets of the time, known as *occupatio*. William N. Fisher studies its use in sixteenth and seventeenth century verse, noting that the most likely image for it is the “crown of praise” (218). Lest it risk the danger of becoming a crown of pride, the crown of praise must be negated. And yet, the wreath does succeed in praising God because “the poem and its poet do not presume to be more than they can be. Thus, it is possible that the poet may, with grace, someday be able to ‘give thee a crown of praise’; and with the awareness of the contingencies on that possibility, the poet can already bestow praise, as poor as it is” (Fisher 219). Arnold Stein notes how “[t]he form of the poem does not merely turn back on itself; it has been turning the whole time, the verbal device being conceptual, a winding with a purpose, and the purpose is to transform” (145). For others still, the winding of the wreath does not end where it began, despite the circular end-rhyme scheme. George Klawitter suggests that Herbert has achieved “a double wreath which will look more like the classic garland of bays (a circle that did not touch at the forehead) than a tightly circular wreath which would not, after all, be God-like: the poem says God’s ways are more straight than circular” (18-19). Klawitter identifies the point at which the wreath doubles back upon itself as being exactly at the middle of the poem, at the repetition of the words “to thee”.

Herbert's mastery and innovation of the pattern poem is such that he both incorporates characteristics of various sub-genres *and* defies limitations placed on the genre by modern critics who enjoy the benefit of hindsight. As Higgins asserts,

one thing that is evident, that is inherent in the concept of a pattern poem, is its unsuitability for any sustained argument of emotional persuasion. Its appeal is immediate and involves the recognition of the image. Thus the Aristotelian rhetorical goal of persuading and convincing a reader is unlikely to be achieved within a pattern poem. (Higgins 1977, 18)

Herbert's successful poetic use of repetition and his use of rhetorical figures like *anadiplosis*, *antimetabole*, and *occupatio*, among others in "A Wreath" in the seventeenth century in fact discounts this theory. His use of rhetoric also avoids the danger that so many German *bildreim* fell into in the seventeenth century:

The standard classicist... will 'decorate' his discourse according to well-tried rhetorical tradition, that is, he will furnish it with *ornatus*. A danger of the system lies in the fact that, in manneristic epochs, the *ornatus* is piled on indiscriminately and meaninglessly. In rhetoric itself, then, lies concealed one of the seeds of Mannerism.<sup>24</sup> (Curtius 274)

While it is safe to say that seventeenth-century England was not the same extravagant climate of the German Baroque, the field of pattern poetry at least was considered a manneristic one. Herbert's use of rhetoric, as 'ornaments of poetry,' is anything but indiscriminate or merely decorative.

Herbert's choice of the pattern poem form for "A Wreath" is both calculated and effective. If in fact "the justification of the [pattern poem] form lies in how it is felt rather

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<sup>24</sup> Ernst Robert Curtius, *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages* (New York, 1953). p.274.

than in its novelty” (Higgins 1977, 17), then “A Wreath” needs no further justification. As is the case with “Easter Wings,” the wreath poem “seems to create the pattern of its picture, as we read it, rather than being forced into it. And as such, it is a rather blatant, didactic example of the way in which Herbert is always using form” (Hollander 266). We must take this observation one step further. Herbert’s rhyme scheme, repetitions, self-corrections, and subtle altering of syntax send delicate hints to the reader that the poem is not just a tight novel wreath as indicated originally by the title and the circular end-rhyme scheme. By fashioning the text to *convey* a shape rather than display it, the poet lures the reader into taking part in the conception and creation of the shape itself; the process inevitably leads to a contemplation of the poem’s content.

Where form is concerned, Higgins has noted the often “formal conservatism” of the English pattern poets, who usually imitated shapes from the *Greek Anthology* or Puttenham’s *The arte of english poesie*. The wreath was not a shape included in either. Ulrich Ernst’s argument for a great deal of continuity in pattern poetry is both dangerous and speculative (Ernst 20). It is dangerous because it threatens to exclude so many poems that do not fit strict definitions and limitations in a field where scholarship and pure genre criticism is still in its infancy. It is also speculative because we do not have enough evidence to show that poets had enough knowledge of the achievements of their predecessors (Higgins 1987, 207). With “A Wreath,” Herbert avoids the formal conservatism of his contemporaries, drawing on the influence of the Greek pattern poets, but not suffering from the associations and meanings that specific shapes bring with them.

Higgins suggests that pattern poems “tap into a formal tradition by their deliberately using a specific set of forms, each of which generates its tradition, and thus each member of the set of pieces belonging to such a form develops its own resonance with that form” (Higgins 1987, 209). Herbert’s integration of the *technopaigneia* and the *carmina figurata* into an original whole shows both an understanding of traditional forms and innovation. The fact that he also displays elements of the *figurengedichte* despite the possibility that he probably did not have knowledge of or access to German poems of the kind, is further testament to his technical virtuosity. Indeed, together with the poems of his predecessors, particularly Robert Southwell and John Donne (the “La Corona” sequence), and the poets that followed (Andrew Marvell’s “The Coronet” and Henry Vaughan’s “The Garland” and “The Wreath”), and with the many *bildreim* that used wreaths as a typical shape, it is very feasible to examine Herbert’s “A Wreath” in the context of a recognized tradition of wreath or garland poems, which we must leave for a later study.

Michael Gallagher suggests that what Herbert was seeking was “a style or ‘character’ which would unite ‘holiness’ and ‘art’” (509). Having observed the technical significance of “A Wreath”, we must now consider its theology. In the following chapter, we will consider the usefulness of the art of pattern poetry to Herbert’s holiness.

### III. A CROWN OF PRAISE

Before examining the semantics of this poem, we must consider the suitability of a wreath as an icon for a religious poem. Undoubtedly, the altar and wings of Herbert's other pattern poems are commonplace religious images; he might also have picked from familiar images like those favored by the composers of early *technopaignea* and *carmina figurata*, such as crosses, crucifixes, goblets, hearts, and temples. If we assume that Herbert's choice of a wreath was calculated, and we must, we might find an answer to the question in an image that is most similar to a wreath. Surely that image is the 'crown.' The crown may refer to the adornment of kings and royal personages, and in this way would be a suitable image for an offering of praise. Yet the crown also carries reference to the crown of thorns Christ was made to wear, making it seemingly inappropriate for the Christian to celebrate in the context of praise or worship. However, Judy Kronenfeld points out the tendency in Renaissance motifs to make a distinction between perishable garlands and imperishable crowns.<sup>1</sup> The poet in all his humanity cannot pretend to offer an imperishable crown, and must, therefore, attempt a wreath. Nevertheless, the perishable wreath made from flowers is inevitably bound to fade and wither, and carries with it

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<sup>1</sup> "Herbert's 'A Wreath' and Devotional Aesthetics: Imperfect Efforts Redeemed by Grace," *A Journal of English Literary History* 48.2 (1981), 291.

connotations of pagan worship. The poet may escape this association by making a Christian *metaphoric* wreath, one that is not material but spiritual, and stands for a greater spiritual reality of victory or praise. But the poetic wreath, as opposed to a pagan actual wreath, is also doomed because it is made by man and is therefore inferior to the creations of God or Nature (Kronenfeld 292-293). Herbert's choice of the wreath as an offering of praise therefore, already anticipates its faultiness and imperfection.<sup>2</sup>

Not only is the crown imperishable, but it is also a reward bestowed on man, by God. We need look no further than the work of Henry Herbert, George's younger brother, to learn how our poet may have understood this. In his edition of *Herbert's Golden Harpe*, Chauncey Wood describes Henry's devotional treatise as "an attempt to cast the sinner's prayer entirely in the words of God, thereby showing the author's dependence upon God for anything of a positive spiritual nature" (xvi).<sup>3</sup> The treatise is structured as 238 numbered paragraphs, each entry supported by Biblical selections in its margin which point to the passages Henry used to compose his prayers. It is not inconceivable that the brothers shared their works, a likelihood that is strengthened by the similarity of topic and

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<sup>2</sup> Rosalie Osmond shows how Herbert overcomes the ambiguity of the wreath form that fascinated metaphysical poets, by emphasizing in his poem its "winding sense": "In the shape of a circle, and designed to honour or praise, it should have signified perfection. But 'wreathing' also signifies 'twisting,' and the crown that should be designed to praise God may instead be the poet's own attempt to gain the laurel crown.... Herbert's distinction between wreath and crown, both of which share the circular form, but only one of which is made by the pejorative method of 'winding,' neatly exploits and overcomes this ambiguity." From "George Herbert: Richness in Austerity," *English Studies in Canada* 6 (1980) 133-144. p.140.

<sup>3</sup> Herbert, Henry, *Herbert's Golden Harpe*, ed. Chauncey Wood (Connecticut: George Herbert Journal Special Studies & Monographs, 1998), xvi.

tone in many instances between *Herbert's Golden Harpe* and *The Temple*, so that what “[Henry] does literally, George does figuratively” (Wood xvi). For example, Henry’s petition for knowledge of and instruction in God’s ways as expressed in #43 of *Herbert's Golden Harpe* shows remarkable affinity to “A Wreath”:

O my god, I lift vp my soule vnto thee, I trust in thee: ô shew me, shew me thy waies, I beseech thee. Teach me, ô teach me thy pathes: ô teach, I beseech thee, teach me the waie that I should chuse, and lead me in thy truth. Turne vnto me my good god, turne vnto me, and haue mercie vpon me: ô heare me in the truth of thy salutation. ô heare thou my praier, I most humblie beseech thee, and grant my desire, my hearts desire, ô lord, with my soule I desire thee. (Henry Herbert p.17)

While Henry uses the simple format of a prose exhortation, his brother George attempts a request of a similar nature in the elaborate form of a poetic wreath. The Biblical citations to entries #97 and #196 point us to passages that his brother George would surely have known when he promised his “crown of praise” at the end of “A Wreath.” These passages include 2.Tim.4:8, Rev.2:10, and James 1:12, which reads: “Blessed is the man that endureth temptation: for when he is tried, he shall receive the crown of life, which the Lord hath promised to them that love him.” The parity between the two works, namely those of Henry and George, suggests that George Herbert would have had in mind specific words aligned to specific ideas when composing his poem.

We can also look to another of George Herbert’s poems, “To all Angels and Saints,” to learn that he reserved the use of the ‘crown’ for God. There, Herbert respectfully restrains himself from addressing his “vows” to the angels and saints, “for our King, / Whom we do all joyntly adore and praise, / Bids no such thing: / And where his

pleasure no injunction layes, / ('Tis [their] own case) ye never move a wing" (16-20). The speaker, therefore, dares not steal a flower from God's "rich crown" to make "a posie for inferiour power" (25). In retrospect, then, the "crown" of l.4 that makes every angel and saint a "king," and which "If not upon his head, yet in his hands," is realized to be the crown that God bestowed on them. The "crown of praise" that the speaker of "A Wreath" will substitute for the "poore wreath" is not so much a crown because of the praise, but a crown because it is concomitant with God's grace. Not only does God's intercession allow the spiritual wreath to become a crown through His grace, but it also completes the form of the poem. The circular rhyme scheme is completed at the end of the poem, and with it, the poetic wreath. God's work in the final lines of the poem are summed up by the first sonnet of John Donne's "*La Corona*," itself an exercise in giving a crown of praise to God: "...what thy thorny crowne gain'd, that give mee, / A crowne of Glory, which doth flower always; / The ends crowne our workes, but thou crowns't our ends..."<sup>4</sup>

Having examined in Chapter Two the patterning devices Herbert employs in "A Wreath," it is worthwhile here to examine the semantics of the poem. One need only look back to those very same patterning devices to find the essential objects of our semantic study. The inverted rhyme scheme of the first and third quatrains (ABAB — BABA) circles and urges the reader's attention towards the central quatrain, and its rhyme scheme (CDCD — "straight-thee-deceit-simplicitie"). Why does Herbert not continue his inverted

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<sup>4</sup> John Donne, "La Corona," *The Complete Poetry of John Donne*, ed. John T. Shawcross (New York, 1968). ll. 7-9.

rhyme (ABAB — ABBA — BABA), and weave his wreath thus? As mentioned previously, there is a movement from an offer of praise in the first quatrain, to a knowledge and recognition of his “crooked winding wayes” in the second. The final quatrain, characterized by a shift in tense from the present indicative to the future, has the speaker offer a crown of praise, conditional on the fulfillment of his request for “simplicitie.” Presumably, then, the key lies in the third quatrain; the speaker’s plea for “simplicity” in l.9 behooves us to study that concept, and its relation to deceitfulness, straightness, and the object of the poem’s praise, God.

Few critics have considered the importance of the term “simplicitie” to this poem at any considerable length. Ted-Larry Pebworth and Claude Summers suggest that “[the wreath] can become a ‘crown of praise’ only when he achieves the ‘simplicitie’ of union with God” (x). However, the poem does not suggest any desire to achieve a mystical or eternal existence outside of the earthly one, wherein the speaker lives. Rather, as is common in much of Herbert’s poetry, the speaker pleads for divine succor precisely in order that he may live his earthly life in proper spiritual terms. Heather Asals reads Herbert’s poetry as attempts at “[d]iscovering God’s name in the operations of both world and poem,” so that “A Wreath” becomes something akin to a meditative exercise:

In his task of one-naming, the poet aims at manifesting what had been predicated for centuries as the ‘simplicity’ of God. Winding through paradox (live-die) and rhetorical involution (deserved praise-praise deserved), ‘A Wreath’ aspires for the structure of tautology (live-live, know-know), an equation which manifests the simplicity of God to the poet: ‘Give me simplicitie, that I may live, / So live and like, that I may know, thy wayes.’ (54)

The text of the poem, however, proves otherwise. It makes no mention, explicit or implicit, of any attempt to simply name God. Rather, the speaker requires simplicity as a means to the multiple ends of living rightly, knowing God's ways, and practicing them, the fruit of which is the ability to praise God properly.

In order to gain an understanding of what Herbert had in mind when he used the term "simplicitie," we must consult some of the primary texts that Herbert would have had in front of him. The first and obvious site to look at is the *King James Bible*. The Bible figured heavily into Herbert's poetry; indeed some of his poems' titles contain specific Biblical references, while many more are meditations on Biblical passages, particularly the Book of Proverbs, the Psalter, and the Gospel parables. Two passages are especially applicable to a study of simplicity as exhorted in "A Wreath." The first is Rom. 12:8.: "Or he that exhorteth, on exhortation: he that giveth, let him do it with simplicity; he that ruleth, with diligence; he that sheweth mercy, with cheerfulness." Later in this study we will question the nature of Herbert's 'exhortation,' and whether the choice of a wreath for the poem's form is truly in keeping with the behest for simplicity. The Biblical passage that seems most appropriate, however, comes from II Cor. 1:12.: "For our rejoicing is this, the testimony of our conscience, that in simplicity and godly sincerity, not with fleshly wisdom, but by the grace of God, we have had our conversation in the world, and more abundantly to you-ward." The concept of simplicity as being opposed to "fleshly wisdom" is one that is manifest in "A Wreath"; the notion of human simplicity as being necessarily concomitant with the grace of God, as we shall see, is also examined in the poem.

The other source that is necessary to consult is the work of the Dominican monk Jèrôme Savonarola, specifically *De Simplicitate Christianae Vitae*, or *The Felicity of a Christian Life*.<sup>5</sup> Elizabeth Clarke maintains that the work (including other writings by Savonarola), originally published in 1496, remained popular since that time and influenced the development of both Protestant devotional literature as well as the Reformation and Counter-Reformation in Europe.<sup>6</sup> *De Simplicitate Christianae Vitae* is one of the few books which we are sure Herbert owned and enjoyed: “Sauonorola in Latine he hath of the simplicity of Chr. Religion and is of great esteme w<sup>th</sup> him,” writes Arthur Woodnoth in a letter to Nicholas Ferrar.<sup>7</sup> Savonarola’s treatise develops a particular conception of *simplicitas*, which we would do well to study at this point.

Although Savonarola explains the various modes of *simplicitas* through Books I - IV of *De Simplicitate*, he does not provide any comprehensive definition until Book V:

...no man can make [prayer] rightly, but he that studyeth simplicity; that is to say, Sincerity or purity of heart, integrity of conversation, together with neglect or renouncing of whatsoever is superfluous. He therefore that desires to live Christianly according to the duty of that State,... must be

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<sup>5</sup> *De Simplicitate Christianae Vitae* (Strasbourg, 1615), and *The Felicity of a Christian Life by Hierome Savonarola, in Five Treatises* (London, 1651). Both the original Latin and the English translation name no publisher, and the English translation remains anonymous. Citations will be taken from the 1651 English translation, unless otherwise noted as “*De Simplicitate*,” appearing in parentheses and accompanied by page number, following the citation.

<sup>6</sup> *Theory and Theology in George Herbert’s Poetry: ‘Divinitie, and Poesie, Met’* (Oxford, 1997). p.27. Clarke is the only critic to date that has explored at any length the connection between the writings of Savonarola and Herbert.

<sup>7</sup> Nicholas Ferrar, *The Ferrar Papers*, ed. B. Blackstone (Cambridge, 1938). p.268.

carefull... to live Simply; that is, Innocently, Purely, and undissemblingly,  
and in a word, answerably in all things to what his profession requireth...  
(71)

This combination of sincerity of heart, aptness of words, and propriety of deeds is one that can hardly be denied to either Herbert the poet, or Herbert the priest. The former two qualities are self-evident to any attentive reader of *The Temple*, or for that matter, his prose treatise, *A Priest to the Temple, or, the Country Parson*. The latter quality is especially observable in any account of Herbert's work at Bemerton and Little Gidding.

Clarke notes how the first conclusion of Book I of *De Simplicitate* establishes a principle that serves as the foundation for the following conclusions, "that spiritual things are understood through corporeal" (Clarke 33). Herbert's use of the Scriptures while teaching at his parish, as well as their use in his poetry, shows that he had a firm grasp of that concept. In fact, Herbert not only imitates the Biblical manner of teaching that uses parables and analogies in his own sermons and poetry, but also creates elaborate religious conceits out of 'ordinary' objects and experiences. Savonarola, on the other hand, has a different agenda: "While Herbert is employing 'things of ordinary use' as metaphors to explain the catechism to his less intelligent parishioners, Savonarola is subscribing to a belief in Neoplatonic cosmology" (Clarke 33). The first mode of *simplicitas* begins with the Platonic idea of a natural entity, or *forma*, which is the only being that is truly *simplex*. Once this *forma* becomes materialized, it becomes variegated. This *forma* is, and can only be, God. "A Wreath" reflects God's pure connection with *simplicitas* in its placement of the "thee" of l.6 above the "deceit" of l. 7, itself directly above the first mention of

“simplicitie,” at the end of l.8. Thus the syntax of those particular end-rhymes mirrors the textual statement, “thee, who art more farre above deceit, / Then deceit seems above simplicitie” (7-8).

The second mode of *simplicitas* is defined by its opposition to *duplicitas* (Clarke 34). The reader not mindful of Savonarola’s polarity between simplicity and duplicity, or of the existence of an alternative antonym to the Latin *simplex*, that is, *duplex*, might well assume the opposite of simplicity to be complexity. If we consult other poems by Herbert, his tendency to oppose “deceit” to “straight” becomes clear. In “Nature,” the speaker implores God to cleanse his heart, so that it may be a more fitting home for the Lord. As in “A Wreath,” Herbert rhymes “straight” with “deceit,” claiming that if God allows sin to linger in his heart, “[His] soul will turn to bubbles straight, / And thence by kinde / Vanish into a winde, / Making [God’s] workmanship deceit” (9-12). Similarly, in “Constancie,” he rhymes “straight” with “deceit” as the poet tries to delineate the qualities of the honest and righteous man. Using a consistent ‘ABBAB’ rhyme scheme throughout the poem, Herbert in Stanza 4 shows the honest man to be one who follows the straight path of God. The honest man, then, is one

Whom none can work or wooe  
To use in any thing a trick or sleight;  
For above all things he abhorres deceit:  
His words and works and fashion too  
All of a piece, and all are straight. (16-20)

At the end of the poem, the honest man is both passive in his obedience, and active in his prayerful attempts to remain that way. The order of God in relation to deceit and

simplicity in lines 7-8 also warrants further clarification. The OED entry for the Book of Common Prayer (1548/9 - March) describes deceits as “al the deceytes of the worlde, the fleshe, and the deuill,” an identification that agrees with the passage from II.Cor.1:12., which describes simplicity as running counter to “fleshly wisdom.” The arrangement of the three words, then, and their description in “A Wreath,” presumably refers to God’s transcendence of the deceitfulness of those who are mired in the “crooked winding wayes” of fleshly wisdom. These same sinners, in all their spiritual ignorance, live their lives as if they were above God and thus ‘seeming’ above simplicity, wander off the straight path of Christ. The Book of Proverbs gives a fitting account of the speaker’s attempt to escape that cycle of deceit: “The wicked worketh a deceitful work: but to him that soweth righteousness shall be a sure reward” (Prov.11:3). The image of a cycle of deceit is a fitting one, for as the poet weaves his circular wreath and is aware of his “crooked winding wayes” wherein he lives, at the same time he is cognizant of the straightness of the line that ever tends to God, so that “God is felt to be easy and impossible to get to at the same time” (Kronenfeld 295). Kronenfeld goes on to note how Herbert manages to avoid creating a circle of sin or grief that traps the speaker by the constant self-corrections and qualifications of the repetitions and phrases: “while Herbert’s particular form of *reduplicatio* emphasizes that the ‘poore wreath’ is not a smoothly conjoined or perfect circle (‘a crown of praise’), it also makes the poem an evolving or linear process of self-correction, rather than the persistence of ‘circling griefs’ [of] ([Southwell’s] ‘S. Peters Complaint’) or [Herbert’s] ‘Sinnes Round’” (299). Kronenfeld also notices the pun on

“straight/strait,” so that it may refer to the rigorous way to eternal life that is described in Matt.8:17.: “Because strait is the gate, and narrow is the way, which leadeth unto life, and few there be that find it.” But the word may also refer to the *impossibly narrow* way to God, one that is strait “as a line” (Kronenfeld 296). Presumably, the speaker of “A Wreath” finds himself in the position of the former, as an *awareness* of the crooked and winding nature of one’s life is the first step on the way back to the path that leads to God. Clarke defines the opposition of *simplicitas* to *duplicitas* as “a lack of consonance between words and deeds. Those who are *simplex* are called so because heart and words and deeds are in harmony. This is a moral definition of an integrity of character that is attainable by unbelievers, but with great difficulty. It is, however, the natural fruit of grace” (34).

It is in this definition that Savonarola might question Herbert over “A Wreath.” Savonarola was well-known for his derogation of rhetoric, especially its use in religious discourse, claiming that “the rules of art and the structures of invention are superficial and human sources for speech, compared with the deeper and divine principles of *simplicitas*” (Clarke 41). If, as “A Wreath” seems to suggest, spiritual simplicity stands as anathema to deceit, which includes also literary ornament, why does Herbert choose such an elaborate poetic form to attain and expound its virtues? We need first consider how Herbert the poet attempts to attain the state of *simplicitas* before we study how Herbert the priest teaches it to his parishioners.

As Elizabeth Clarke suggests, it is quite possible that Herbert was drawn to

Savonarola's work because he, too, was a Christian poet wary of poetry's pretensions and tendency to cloud spiritual simplicity (30). Clarke notes how Savonarola's own poetry was not dissimilar from that of other poets of the period, including Herbert. The Dominican monk was wont to use complex metre and rhyme schemes, and lines of varied length, so that "[t]he number of external constraints is unexpected in a poet whose theories emphasize the natural production of words" (61). Savonarola's concept of *simplicitas exteriour*, "or that which consisteth in the Actions and conversation of men" (50) as is manifest in their dress and speech, proves very difficult for any Christian poet striving to attain the state of *simplicitas interiour*. Only those that have achieved *simplicitas* can assess the degree of rhetoric suitable to *simplicitas interiour*; paradoxically, the principle of *simplicitas* cannot give rise to, use, or advocate anything that involves deceit, rhetoric included. The result, then, is little possibility for a mixture of human and divine in Savonarola's model of *simplicitas exteriour*. In his Neoplatonic vision of the good Christian's life, there remains only "inchoate" potential for true felicity, so that Savonarola's conception of grace leaves little room for human agency in the "true Christian" life: "a Christians life is not founded upon any naturall principle either within or without man, but is something supernaturall, that is to say, in the grace of God.... But Grace is a thing of a much nobler and more perfect essence than nature; and therefore the operations or effects w<sup>ch</sup> proceed from thence, must needs excell those of nature" (Savonarola 24-25).

Herbert's poetic, on the other hand, while not denying the necessary workings of

God's grace (as indeed "A Wreath" manifests), often focuses on the human aspect of being a Christian in harmony with God. In "Providence," as Herbert praises God's creation and acknowledges His omnipotence, he is also aware of man's special place and duty: "Of all the creatures both in sea and land / Onely to Man thou hast made known thy wayes, / And put the penne alone into his hand, / And made him Secretarie of thy praise" (5-8). Great as this responsibility may be, it is in many ways also impossible to fulfill — man's attempt to praise God adequately is often an exercise in learning *how* to praise Him; the paradox is that the diligent attempt and learning is often offered, and received, as praise. In "A Wreath," the poet must first learn simplicity in order to avoid deceit and excessive literary ornament; when he does learn and achieve the necessary sincerity, he will reject the "poore wreath" and offer instead the "crown of praise." Herbert is aware of the dual nature of the act of praising: "but the hand you stretch, / Is mine to write, as it is yours to raise" (23-24). It becomes evident that Savonarola's principle of *simplicitas exterior*, infused with neo-platonic premises, and coupled with the monk's own poetry as proof of how the art is always tainted by rhetoric, "is inadequate as a basis for judging — or producing — human rhetoric" (Clarke 61).

The very nature of rhetoric means that it is invaluable, and indeed necessary, to Herbert as priest (whose parishioners must include those at Little Gidding and Bemerton, as well as his readers). Clarke suggests that a sixteenth-century understanding of language saw rhetoric as not only natural, but indeed useful, in that it could help improve fallen nature. For proof of this, we must consult Puttenham, whose *The arte of english poesie*

Herbert would surely have read:

there be artes and methodes both to speake and to perswade and also to dispute, and by which the naturall is in some sorte relieved, as th'eye by his spectacle, I say relieved in his imperfection, but not made more perfit then the naturall, in which respect I call those arts of Grammar, *Logicke*, and *Rhetorick* not bare imitations... but by long and studious obseruation rather a repititio or reminiscens naturall, reduced into perfection, and made prompt by use and exercise. And so whatsoever a man speakes or perswades he doth it not by imitation artificially, but by observation naturally (though one follow another) because it is both the same and the like that nature doth suggest.<sup>8</sup>

Herbert's audience is of great importance in his poems, for if he were writing only to God, the spontaneous utterance of the last line of "Jordan (I)" would suffice: "*My God, My King.*" Instead, the poet and priest must mediate between divinity and humanity, the process of which demands the importation, understanding, digestion and re-shaping of divine word and principle in order for the message to be successfully received, as is evident in Herbert's prayer before his sermons: "Lord Jesu! Teach thou me, that I may teach them: Sanctifie, and inable all my powers, that in their full strength they may deliver thy message reverently, readily, faithfully, & fruitfully."<sup>9</sup> This process doubtless requires the full use of the poet's rhetorical abilities. Herbert further explains the necessary persuasive powers involved in preaching in chapters six and seven of *The Country Parson*. There the preacher must "[lift] up his heart and hands, and eyes, and [use] all other

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<sup>8</sup> George Puttenham, *The arte of english poesie* (Cambridge, 1587). p.307.

<sup>9</sup> George Herbert, *The Works of George Herbert*, ed. F.E. Hutchinson (Oxford, 1941). p.289. The cited quotation appears in Herbert's *A Priest to the Temple, Or, The Country Parson*. Further references to this work will be cited by page number(s), appearing in parentheses following the quotation.

gestures which may expresse a hearty, and unfeyned devotion” (Herbert 231). He is careful, however, to warn that “the character of his Sermon is Holiness; he is not witty, or learned, or eloquent, but Holy” (233). Nothing is more convincing than when the prayer is perceived to be “hart-deep”:

..as this is the true reason of his inward feare, so he is content to the utmost of his power; that being first affected himself, hee may affect also his people, knowing that no Sermon moves them so much to a reverence, which they forget againe, when they come to pray, as a devout behaviour in the very act of praying. (231)

Herbert’s opinion of the necessity of eloquence where the ‘plain style’ will not work shares some similarity with Augustine’s concerns in *On Christian Doctrine*. For although “it is a mark of good and distinguished minds to love the truth within words and not the words,” Augustine nevertheless concedes that “since there is some comparison between eating and learning, it may be noted that on account of the fastidiousness of many even that food without which life is impossible must be seasoned.”<sup>10</sup> Augustine points out that just as the listener will remain captivated if he enjoys the words, in the same way he will act only if the words and message persuade him adequately: “It is necessary therefore for the ecclesiastical orator, when he urges that something be done, not only to teach that he may instruct and to please that he may hold attention, but also to persuade that he may be victorious” (Augustine 138). In that light, Herbert’s parson prescribes numerous methods of “procuring [the] attention” of his parishioners, including the discriminating use of eye-contact, picking sentences that are “truly affecting,” picking Scriptural texts that are

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<sup>10</sup> *On Christian Doctrine*, tr. D.W. Robertson Jr. (New York, 1958). p.136.

appropriate to a particular audience, and by telling “stories and sayings” rather than “exhortations... which are thick, and heavy, and hard to raise to a poynt of Zeal, and fervency, and need a mountaine of fire to kindle them” (233).

Herbert’s knowledge of the persuasive powers of rhetoric and eloquence is observable in his poetry as well. The concept of poetry as being a means of attracting those who would otherwise not be interested in religious writing was not an unfamiliar one in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. In his dedication to Prince Henry of his translation of du Barthes’ *Third Day*, Thomas Winter describes the suggestive powers of well-written verse: “when the reader thinks peradventure but to tickle his eare, with the sweete measure and delicate cadence of a majestical verse; he finds that both Divinity and Philosophy do steale upon him unawares.”<sup>11</sup> Herbert expounds a similar belief in the opening poem to *The Temple*, “The Church-Porch”:

Thou, whose sweet youth and early hopes inhance  
Thy rate and price, and mark thee for a treasure;  
Hearken unto a Verser, who may chance  
Ryme thee to good, and make a bait of pleasure.  
A verse may finde him, who a sermon flies,  
And turn delight into a sacrifice. (1-6)

Herbert’s choice of the complicated form for “A Wreath” in some ways does run contrary to his attempts elsewhere to avoid “decking the sense to sell.”<sup>12</sup> Here the intention is not to merely “sell” poetry, but instead, to suggest ways of living a true Christian life; if so, we

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<sup>11</sup> Guillaume de Saluste du Bartas, *Third Day*, tr. Thomas Winter (London, 1604).

<sup>12</sup> From “Jordan (II)”, l.6.

may excuse him for the compromise in poetic principle. Herbert perhaps chooses the elaborate form of “A Wreath” to show that in the duplicitous life of the sinner, the sinful poet is necessarily complex. Later, when he fully understands the principle of *simplicitas*, he can discard literary ornament, and simply utter, “*My God, My King*.”

Keeping in mind, then, Herbert’s knowledge of and desire for spiritual simplicity, we must consider whether the wreath he offers to God is successful in its intentions of praising God. We must first distinguish between the two types of wreaths that are being constructed and offered — the poetic wreath, and the spiritual one.

We have already observed how the poetic wreath gets gradually looser as the poem progresses. As we move from line to line, there is a noticeable loosening of the formal repetition, including the instances of self-correction. The poetic wreath, as mentioned earlier, is completed only in that the circular rhyme scheme that characterizes the first and third quatrain give the appearance of a wreathed form. As the poem progresses, however, the intended gift changes. The speaker has moved from offering a “wreath” of praise, to promising a “crown” of praise at some future time.

The spiritual success of the poem, however, must be judged not so much on the completion of the wreath form, but on the achievement of the wreath’s intention, to praise. The poet and speaker in effect use the poem as an exercise unto praise, which itself, paradoxically, becomes an act of praise. To further understand this paradox, we must examine the need for and workings of grace in this poem. The Christian poet cannot complete the act of praise without the intercession of divine grace, regardless of the

quantity and quality of technical devices, rhetorical or otherwise. For if the poem is to be completed, and the life of *simplicitas* is to be begun, God must intercede. As Herbert composes “A Wreath,” he finds himself in the same position as the speaker of another of his poems, “The Pearl. Matth. 13.45”. Despite the speaker’s fine breeding, vast knowledge, and proficiency with wit, he needs God’s “silken twist” if he will escape life’s series of labyrinths and climb to Him:

I know all these, and have them in my hand:  
Therefore not sealed, but with open eyes  
I flie to thee, and fully understand  
Both the main sale, and the commodities;  
And at what rate and price I have thy love;  
With all the circumstances that may move:  
Yet through these labyrinths, not my groveling wit,  
But thy silk twist let down from heav’n to me,  
Did both conduct and teach me, how by it  
To climbe to thee. (31-40)

The initial intention, composition, completion, and final product of “A Wreath” is also further illuminated by Augustinian notions of grace. St. Augustine made distinctions between prevenient and subsequent grace, and sufficient and efficacious grace. Prevenient grace is that which “‘comes before’ any human response to God in justification or conversion.”<sup>13</sup> Thus, prevenient grace would be extended at baptism, for example, when the child has performed no conscious works in understanding, turning to, or accepting the Lord. This gift towards sanctification, therefore, is entirely unmerited,

For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves:

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<sup>13</sup> *Westminster Dictionary of Theological Terms*, ed. Donald K. McKim (Louisville, 1996). p.120.

it is the gift of God:

Not of works, lest any man should boast. (Eph. 2:8-9)

Subsequent grace, on the other hand, is that in which divine power co-operates with man after his conversion, which will become evident in “A Wreath” as we study its movement towards the final promise of a “crown of praise.”

The poem’s initial offer of a “wreath” starts Herbert’s exercise in preparing himself to receive God’s grace, and, subsequently, to praise Him. The “winding” motion of a wreath, as we have seen earlier, is not appropriate to God and is instead used by the poet to wind his earthly and sinful life to death, for “[l]ife only lives in the death to the world, in the straight, undeviating orientation to God” (Thekla 189). By the middle of the poem, and coinciding with a loosening of the formal repetition, the focus has moved from the physical life to the spiritual:

who knoweth all my wayes,  
My crooked winding wayes, wherein I live,  
Wherein I die, not live: for life is straight,  
Straight as a line, and ever tends to thee (3a-6)

The Christian poet is here following the advice of Paul, and abandoning the life of the flesh so that he may instead live again, for the Spirit:

For they that are after the flesh do mind the things of the flesh; but  
they that are after the Spirit the things of the Spirit.

For to be carnally minded is death; but to be spiritually minded is  
life and peace.

For if ye live after the flesh, ye shall die: but if ye through the Spirit  
do mortify the deeds of the body, ye shall live. (Rom.8:5-6, 13)

He is able to do this through the aid of prevenient grace and “sufficient grace,” that which is adequate but not followed by his desired result. The poet’s exercise to this point has

been one not directed at God, but focused instead on himself. God, after all, already knows the nature of the poet's crooked ways; the poet instead must turn his attention, as he does in line 10, to trying to know God's ways. He learns that the means to this end is the state of simplicity, which he requires in order to praise God adequately. To do this, he must prepare himself to receive the necessary intercession of God, for "the task is, that a man may well align himself with this kind of divine motions" (*De Simplicitate* 46).

According to Clarke, "[i]n prayer a believer opens himself to the influence of God moving in him, and thus strengthens the grace which is already there.... Prayer is thus supremely effective in that it raises the soul to God, thus allowing the divine Mover more access to do His work in the soul" (41). Herbert's prayer in "A Wreath," begun through the state of sufficient grace, can now be completed not through any rhetorical twist by the poet, but by the necessary workings of "efficacious grace."

Efficacious grace is that which serves to bring about a desired result; there existed a debate between the Dominican and Jesuit orders, so that "the former held the efficacy of such grace to be dependent on the character of the grace itself, the latter on the fact that it is given under circumstances which God foresees to be congruous with the dispositions of the recipient."<sup>14</sup> For our purposes, the desired result is the completion of the poem, which serves to praise God. Although Augustine states that grace is irresistible by the Christian

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<sup>14</sup> *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* ed. E.A. Livingstone (Oxford, 1997). p.533. The aforementioned work goes on to suggest that both sufficient and efficacious forms of grace are different forms of 'actual grace,' which is "[a] certain motion of the soul, bestowed by God *ad hoc* for the production of some good act" (698).

subject, he is nevertheless convinced that man is still responsible for persevering in doing good works and, more importantly for this poem, for preparing himself spiritually that he may be open to divine intercession, that his disposition may be congruous with the grace God will give him (Livingstone 697). Over the course of “A Wreath,” as the speaker returns his eye with sincerity towards God, he is able to see clearly what he requires to achieve a spiritual state that is capable of giving proper praise. The focus has been realigned, so that instead of the speaker’s knowledge of his own ways, he learns that he must try to know God’s ways. He is reminded that although the praise that God must receive is deserved, he himself did not deserve the simplicity that was required in order for that praise to be properly given; the result is that the focus has shifted from the *gift* of the wreath of praise, to the *giver*. This new knowledge gained does not, however, deter the speaker. After learning that the wreath of praise he has offered is lacking and unsuitable, his prideful (yet ignorant) offering becomes a humble request; if he lives correctly, he will discard the wreath and offer instead the “crown of praise.” The offer of praise still stands — it has simply changed from one in the present, to one in the future. For now, the wreath remains as an “offering of the transformed life” (Stein 144).

The speaker is thus trying to follow the teachings of the Book of Proverbs: “In all thy ways acknowledge him, and he shall direct thy paths” (Prov. 3:6). By acknowledging his dependence on God for living correctly and indeed, for praising Him, the speaker of “A Wreath” allows God, through His grace, to complete the poetic wreath (through the



*Temple*, in which sanctification is completed at death.<sup>16</sup>

When seen as an exercise by the Christian poet in preparing himself to be able to praise God, the composition of “A Wreath” also provides an answer to the question of how Herbert can reconcile the use of rhetoric in a poem that supposedly privileges simplicity over deceit. For this explanation, we must consider the concept of rhetorical ‘motions’ in the Renaissance. Clarke provides a useful genealogy of that concept, claiming it to be an amalgamation of the Latin rhetoricians’ (including Aristotle, Quintilian, and Cicero) concept of *energeia*, which she describes as “two kinds of movement — that which signifies actuality within the figure of speech, and that caused by the figure of speech within the reader” (20), and Erasmus’ concept of *enargeia*, defined as follows:

We use *enargeia* whenever we do not explain a thing simply, but display it to be looked at as if it were expressed in colour in a picture, so that it may seem that we have painted, not narrated, and that the reader has seen, not read.<sup>17</sup>

Erasmus’ definition of *enargeia* surely brings to mind the very nature of Herbert’s “A Wreath,” which both conveys a concept through its text, and also allows the reader to see the interior change in the poet as he moves through the piece.

As Clarke notes, the mixing of the Latin *energeia* and the Renaissance *enargeia* led to something akin to the sentiments expressed in Philip Sidney’s *An Apology for*

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<sup>16</sup> The theological and structural ramifications of the placement of “A Wreath” and other poems in the sequence of *The Temple* is treated at length in Gene Edward Veith, *Reformation Spirituality: The Religion of George Herbert* (Lewisburg, 1985), and Janis Lull, *The Poem in Time: Reading George Herbert’s Revisions of The Church* (Newark, 1990).

<sup>17</sup> Erasmus, *Opera Omnia*, ed. J. Frobel (Basle, 1540), i.66.

*Poetry*, which claims the poet to be superior to the philosopher on the grounds that poet (especially a religious one), is more able to ‘move’ the reader. This power is heightened when the poet can convince the reader that “in truth they feel those passions, which easily... may be betrayed by that same forcibleness, or *energeia*... of the writer.”<sup>18</sup> The ramifications of the power of rhetoric to ‘move’ the reader are important to the Christian poet, for it is no longer merely a sign of “fleshly wisdom,” but rather, a means of using “literary ornament” to the end of spiritual good, namely, moving his readers to virtue. If so, then Herbert’s *energeia* in “A Wreath” is surely compelling. The ingredients that comprise his power to move the reader in “A Wreath” are numerous and highly capable. The technical artistry of Herbert the poet, in conveying the shape of a reader through the means of repetition, self-correction, rhyme, and syntax is only boosted by the resources of Herbert, the priest. Besides the devout love of God that is evident throughout his poetry and prose writings, Herbert also brings with him the prevenient grace of God, and the subsequent and efficacious grace that is infused as the poem progresses. The result is that “A Wreath” succeeds not only in praising God, as a private exercise by a Christian subject, but also moves its readers to virtue, as an inspiring exhortation by a Christian poet and parson.

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<sup>18</sup> Philip Sidney, *An Apology for Poetry or The Defence of Poesy*, ed. G. Shepherd (London, 1965). p. 86.

## CONCLUSION

If we study “A Wreath” as a poem that is *shaped* so as to convey a specific image, for specific purposes of praising God and instructing Christians — in short, then, if we consider “A Wreath” as a pattern poem, we discover basic questions that have to be asked of all seventeenth-century devotional poetry, not simply that of George Herbert. These questions center around issues of composition in the period, specifically, the way poets considered *form* to be intimately connected with the *content* of a poem. It is quite possible that the seventeenth-century poets considered specific forms to be suitable for particular ideas, so that those associations are only left to be deciphered by us in the poetry they have left behind.<sup>1</sup> For example, we might posit a particular genre of wreath poetry, of which “A Wreath” is an example. That genre would include Donne’s “La Corona,” Marvell’s “The Coronet,” and Henry Vaughan’s “The Garland” and “The Wreath.”

Furthermore, besides “A Wreath,” there remain numerous other poems by George Herbert whose readings would benefit from a consideration in the context of pattern poetry, including “Aaron,” “The Call,” “The Church-Floore,” “Clasping of Hands,” “The

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<sup>1</sup> In fact many of these poets, including George Herbert and John Donne, were friendly with each other and their respective families, and often shared and discussed poems and the general subject of poetry as well.

Collar,” “Coloss.3.3.,” “Sinnes Round,” and “Trinitie Sunday.” Like “A Wreath,” many of these poems also seem to convey a shape. This prevalence of patterning of individual poems suggests the possibility of a larger pattern at work in Herbert’s body of poetry, especially if we consider the series of numbered poems scattered throughout *The Temple*, including the “Affliction,” “Jordan,” and “Love” series. Their placement at different points in the sequence might very well suggest a similar wreathing pattern at work in *The Temple*, which hitherto has only been studied in terms of a linear (or at least architecturally linear, as it were) sequence. The existence of such a circular pattern would not be surprising, especially given Herbert’s tendency to emphasize struggles or conflicts in individual poems as being ones that the Christian will face more than once in his lifetime, despite the fact that the speaker of each individual piece may find resolution within the poem itself.

The position of “A Wreath” in *The Temple* also gives us insight into particular theological insights of the period, particularly the point in the life of a Christian at which he can truly and appropriately praise God. “A Wreath” appears near the end of the sequence of *The Temple*, before “Death,” “Dooms-Day,” “Judgement,” and “Heaven,” which are the final poems (or steps) of sanctification before the closing piece, “Love (III),” which in turn celebrates the final communion of God and Christian, in heaven. Perhaps Herbert is suggesting that it is only at the point of “Love (III)” when the Christian can truly give a “crown of praise.”

Furthermore, while this study recognizes the elusive nature of Augustinian notions

of grace, it would nevertheless prove rewarding to consider them, along with the writings of other eminent Christian writers, including St. Thomas Aquinas, in the context of Herbert's body of poetry. Besides Elizabeth Clarke's *Theory and Theology in George Herbert's Poetry: 'Divinitie, and Poesie, Met'*, very little commentary has been made on the influence of Savonarola on Herbert's thought and poetry. Louis Martz's seminal work, *The Poetry of Meditation*, mentions that influence, but only briefly.<sup>2</sup> In order to accurately identify Savonarola's importance to Herbert, one would also have to relate the Dominican monk's devotional prose writings to specific instances in Herbert's poetry. Furthermore, in light of our knowledge of Herbert's enjoyment of Savonarola's prose writings, it would not be too much to assume that he would also have read his poetry. It is well known that Herbert enjoyed parodying secular poems by re-dedicating their form, structure and content to sacred use.<sup>3</sup> Although Savonarola wrote devotional poetry, it is quite possible that Herbert would have attempted a piece in imitation of another by the Dominican monk (the result, one should certainly expect, would be of a more refined nature).

Studying individual poems by Herbert in the context of specific forms that are suited to particular spiritual quandaries, as in the case of "A Wreath," would not only aid the study of other poets' use of those forms, and of our understanding of their theology,

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<sup>2</sup> *The Poetry of Meditation: A Study in English Literature of the Seventeenth Century* (New Haven, 1954), 282-285.

<sup>3</sup> The most famous instance is Herbert's parody of the first sonnet of Philip Sidney's *Astrophel and Stella* sequence, resulting in "Jordan (II)." C.A. Patrides offers other examples of where Herbert has parodied secular poetry, in *The English Poems of George Herbert* (London, 1974).

but also certainly add to Herbert's already acknowledged reputation for being one of few poets who were successfully able to unite "holiness" and "art."

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