THE POETRY OF RELIGIOUS SORROW IN EARLY MODERN ENGLAND

In early modern England, religious sorrow was seen as a form of spiritual dialogue between the soul and God, expressing how divine grace operates at the level of human emotion. Through close readings of both Protestant and Catholic poetry, Kuchar explains how the discourses of “devout melancholy” helped generate some of the most engaging religious verse of the period. From Robert Southwell to John Milton, from Aemilia Lanyer to John Donne, the language of “holy mourning” informed how poets represented the most intimate and enigmatic aspects of faith as lived experience. In turn, “holy mourning” served as a way of registering some of the most pressing theological issues of the day. By tracing poetic representations of religious sorrow from Crashaw’s devotional verse to Shakespeare’s weeping kings, Kuchar expands our understanding of the interconnections between poetry, theology, and emotion in post-Reformation England.

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For Erin E. Kelly
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Acknowledgments

This book began while I enjoyed the support of a Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada postdoctoral fellowship. I would like to thank Marshall Grossman and the Department of English at the University of Maryland College Park for supporting the postdoctoral phase of this project. More recently, the book has benefited from the support of the Faculty of Humanities at the University of Victoria and from many colleagues and friends. Patrick Grant and Ed Pechter kindly commented on large portions of the manuscript at various stages. Andrew Griffin, James Knapp and Grant Williams helpfully responded to parts of the manuscript and have provided enormously appreciated friendship and dialogue. Melinda Gough offered very useful feedback on an early version of Chapter 3. Mary Silcox and David Clark continue to be implicit interlocutors in my work: my discussions of apostrophe constitute responses to several conversations with David and my interest in Lanyer was inspired by Mary’s engaging approach to Salve Deus. The influence of Sylvia Bowerbank also remains strong here and it is my hope that this book does something to honor her memory. The members of the early modern studies group at the University of Victoria helpfully commented on an early version of Chapter 6. I am grateful to Jennifer Clement, Lowell Gallagher, Kenneth Graham, and Arthur Marotti, for inviting me to try out portions of this project at the Renaissance Society of America, a Clark Library Conference on early modern Catholicism, a session on George Herbert at the Canadian Society for Renaissance Studies, and an MLA panel on devotional poetry. Questions and comments from numerous participants at these conferences find responses here, especially some questions on Crashaw from Richard Rambuss. The anonymous readers at Cambridge University Press offered extremely rigorous comments on the manuscript, and Clare Zon offered patient and skilled editing. I would also like to acknowledge the support of my chair, Robert Miles and associate dean, Claire Carlin, as well as the intellectual camaraderie and good humor I share with many other colleagues and friends who have been sources of
ongoing dialogue about my work, especially Michael Best, Luke Carson, Ronald Corthell, Chris Douglas, Gordon Fulton, Ian Higgins, Ken Jackson, Janelle Jenstad, Allan Mitchell, Linda Morra, Stephen Ross, and Lincoln Shlensky. Many of my students have also been teachers to me, especially Nina Belojevik, Veronica Bishop, and Alison Knight. My research assistants, Katie Paterson and Peter Perkins, have been of great help. My parents, Joseph and Beverley Kuchar, continue to be a source of wonderful support. Most of all, I would like to thank Erin Kelly for making writing about sorrow much more enjoyable than it probably ought to have been and for reminding me during the composition of this book that there is more to life than compunction. Erin’s contributions to this book are too many to cite.

An early version of Chapter 3 appeared as “Andrew Marvell’s Anamorphic Tears,” *Studies in Philology* 103.3 (2006), 345–81; Chapter 4 appeared as “Aemilia Lanyer and the Virgin’s Swoon: Theology and Iconography in *Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum*,” *English Literary Renaissance* 37.1 (2007), 47–73 and Chapter 5 appeared as “Petrarchism and Repentance in John Donne’s *Holy Sonnets*,” *Modern Philology* (February 2008); I am grateful to the editors of these journals for permission to reproduce this material and to the anonymous readers for their helpful comments.
Abbreviations and notes on texts

OED  Oxford English Dictionary (2nd edn)

The Complete Poetry of Richard Crashaw, ed. George Walton Williams (New York: W. W. Norton, 1970). References to “The Weeper” are from this edition and are given in the text by stanza number. Except when noted otherwise I cite the 1648 version of “The Weeper.” Other references to Crashaw’s poems are from this edition and are indicated as either line or stanza numbers in the text.

The Complete English Poems of John Donne, ed. C. A. Patrides (London: Dent, 1985). Except when noted otherwise, references to Donne’s Songs and Sonnets are from this edition and are given by line numbers.


The Variorum Edition of the Poetry of John Donne, volume 7 part I: The Holy Sonnets, ed. Gary A. Stringer (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005). Except when noted otherwise, references to the Holy Sonnets are from this edition and are given in the text by sequence (Original, 1635, Westmoreland, or Revised) and by line numbers.

references to Herbert’s poetry are from this edition and are given by line numbers in the text.


William Shakespeare, *King Richard II*, ed. Charles Forker, Arden 3rd Series (London: Thomson Learning, 2002). References to the play are from this edition and are given in the text by act, scene, and line numbers.


Except when noted otherwise, references to the Bible are from a modern spelling edition of the King James version.

All italics in quotations are original except where marked.
This article is focused on English-language literature rather than the literature of England, so that it includes writers from Scotland, Wales, the Crown dependencies, and the whole of Ireland, as well as literature in English from countries of the former British Empire, including the United States. However, until the early 19th century, it only deals with the literature of the United Kingdom, the Crown dependencies and Ireland. It does not include literature written in the other languages of Britain. He is the author of Divine Subjection: The Rhetoric of Sacramental Devotion in Early Modern England; The Poetry of Religious Sorrow in Early Modern England; and co-editor of The Return to Theory in Early Modern English Studies Vol. 2. Show all. Reviews. (Naya Tsentourou, Modern Language Review, Vol.113 (2), April, 2018) An essential inclusion on any Herbert bibliography. The ultimate payoff of George Herbert and the Mystery of the Word is not just a deep sense of Herbert’s commitment to mystery, but the realization that this may be a root cause of the blossoming of seventeenth-century religious poetry.