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McGrath, Patrick J. Early Modern Asceticism: Literature, Religion and Austerity in the English Renaissance

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McGrath, Patrick J.

Early Modern Asceticism: Literature, Religion and Austerity in the English Renaissance.

Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2020. Pp. 236. ISBN 978-1-4875-0532-5 (hardcover) \$70.

Patrick J. McGrath's *Early Modern Asceticism* explores how various forms of voluntary austerity and self-denial were understood, and how they influenced cultural production, in seventeenth-century England. Central to the book is the distinction between physical and spiritual asceticism. In the post-Reformation world, the former was typically associated with Catholicism and consisted of practices such as virginity and celibacy, physical mortification, and monastic sequestration. The latter was associated with a Protestant emphasis on spiritual forms of self-denial, particularly on a transformation of the heart through which one is conformed to God; this entailed a disparagement of what was now seen as a carnal preoccupation with punishing the body. The book explores how people in the period navigated asceticism's paradoxes, especially the fact that the body was often construed as the means of overcoming the body. While polemical conflict often obscured the fact that physical and spiritual asceticism could be reconciled, this book shows how the period's writers frequently collapse one form of asceticism into the other.

Patrick McGrath argues that asceticism is newly fraught in the period because it expresses several of the core issues of reform. This is particularly evident in the seventeenth-century conflict between Laudianism, with its apparent return to Catholic practices including a promotion of virginity and celibacy, and puritanism, with its celebration of marriage and emphasis on inner spirituality. The book argues that the inevitable tensions between spiritual and physical asceticism became a major theme in the literature and religion of the time. One of the book's contributions is to challenge the Weberian narrative—recently developed by Charles Taylor—in which the early modern period is marked by a decline of asceticism which allows for the emergence of the autonomous subject of modernity. Against this account, McGrath argues for significant continuity between the early modern period and prior times: different ascetic forms in the post-Reformation era conceal a continuity of purpose with earlier history.

The core of the book is five chapters: on Donne, Milton (who receives two chapters), Marvell, and Bunyan. In all cases, the book's attention to asceticism reveals surprising and counterintuitive aspects to these figures. Donne the amorist and supposed architect of modern heterosexual desire valorizes the unmarried life following the death of his wife; Milton the puritan embraces the physical asceticism of virginity, and therefore a markedly Laudian sensibility, in his early works *A Mask* and *Lycidas*; Marvell the "asexual" criticizes asceticism for not going far enough in eliminating sexuality; and Bunyan the champion of spiritual asceticism elevates ways of life strongly associated with the monastery.

The readings that stand at the heart of the book are impressively sensitive and insightful, and McGrath brings to bear new historical and literary contexts which are often illuminating: a notable example is the significance of the rogation ritual to *Lycidas*. The book is refreshing in its clear-eyed reassessment of critical orthodoxies and in its pushback against our culture's knee-jerk dismissal of asceticism; in consequence, McGrath is able to draw our attention to phenomena that the hegemonic hedonism of our own time either cannot see or simply rejects as pathological. That being said, the book would have offered a fuller account of early modern asceticism had it given more space to elaborating the positive things that asceticism was seen to offer to people. Perhaps the ultimate paradox of asceticism is that it could become a gateway to increased joy by enabling closeness to God and a transformed capacity to love one's neighbours. More attention to such a phenomenology of asceticism would have been welcome.

The book's relatively circumscribed focus is understandable: it allows for wonderfully focused close readings and a productive foregrounding of Laudian-puritan debate as its main context. However, one leaves the book wishing to hear more about the larger philosophical-anthropological issues raised by asceticism. For instance, what conception of the human person, and the person's relationship to the world and God, do these various forms of asceticism entail? McGrath stays very close to the texts he analyzes and tends to eschew theorizing on asceticism and its broader implications.

The book's limited scope also entails a sidelining of the mystical tradition in Christian thought, which has important correspondences with forms of asceticism McGrath discusses. In particular, the emphasis on spiritual asceticism—an overcoming of the self—is at the heart of much mystical thought. Yet some mystical writers do not advance an annihilation of the self "full stop," but

rather uphold a return to the true self in God following a purgative process. As McGrath notes, the puritan Richard Baxter advanced such a view, but McGrath is not interested in developing this dimension of asceticism. Instead, this book tends to emphasize a zero-sum portrayal in which humans and the divine are in competition with each other: according to this logic, people need to annihilate themselves to make room for God. While certainly many people at the time promoted such a view, not all the writers analyzed here take this approach, and further attention could have been given to more profound and mystical accounts of ascetic life. From the perspective of the latter tradition, to diminish all that separates the person from God—including selfhood—is to better attend to God as the fullness of being, in whom inheres all that exists, including the “self,” in its true form.

Despite its limits, *Early Modern Asceticism* makes important contributions to the study of the religious life of seventeenth-century England and complicates conventional accounts of several of the period’s central authors in valuable ways. It will be of interest to scholars of early modern literature and religion, and will be enriching reading for students of the various authors it analyzes.

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La Popelinière, Lancelot Voisin de.

L’Histoire de France. Tome IV (1563–1567).

Édition critique par Thierry Rentet et Pierre-Jean Souriac, avec la collaboration d’Odette Turias et de Denise Turrel, sous la direction de Thierry Rentet. Travaux d’Humanisme et Renaissance 619. Genève : Droz, 2021. 315 p. ISBN : 978-2-600-06241-1 (relié) 89 CHF.

Après trois premiers tomes parus ces dix dernières années (t. I, 2011 ; t. II, 2016 ; t. III, 2019), l’équipe éditoriale chargée de publier *L’Histoire de France* (1581) de La Popelinière (1541–1608), dirigée à présent par Thierry Rentet, nous livre ici le quatrième volume, qui concerne les années du début des guerres de religion. Ce tome IV reproduit les Livres 9 et 10 qui relatent les circonstances