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# Review of The Literary Culture of the Reformation: Grammar and Grace / Liturgy and Literature in the Making of Protestant England by Brian Cummings and Timothy Rosendale

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***The Literary Culture of the Reformation: Grammar and Grace.*** By Brian Cummings. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002 (paperback: 2007). ISBN 978-0-19-818735-6 (cloth), 978-0-19-922633-7 (paper). Pp. xviii + 470. \$209.00 (cloth), \$55.00 (paper).

***Liturgy and Literature in the Making of Protestant England.*** By Timothy Rosendale. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007. ISBN 978-0-521-87774-9. Pp. x + 237. \$95.00.

Scholarly interest in the impact of religious controversy on the literature of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century England is stronger now than it has ever been. However, while fine studies of individual authors and works abound, Brian Cummings' *The Literary Culture of the Reformation: Grammar and Grace* and Timothy Rosendale's *Liturgy and Literature in the Making of Protestant England* provide a larger perspective on the Reformation's crises of interpretation and representation. Cummings' book, at 431 pages (not counting notes and bibliography) is the wider-ranging of the two, covering more than 150 years and

examining the literary productions of everyone from Luther, Erasmus, and Calvin to Sidney, Donne, and Milton. Rosendale's book, which focuses on the Book of Common Prayer and its impact on the English religious and literary imagination, is more modest in scope; however, the two books complement rather than compete with one other, and both are essential reading for anyone interested in the literature of the English Reformation.

In Cummings' hands, "Reformation literature" is a capacious category indeed, encompassing a range of genres and authors who are Catholic, Calvinist, and everything in between. The violence and extremism that raged through all of Early Modern Christendom for more than a century was, Cummings argues, part of a single crisis: one that was about textual interpretation and ultimately about grammar. In turning from the Vulgate Bible to the Hebrew and Greek texts of scripture, scholars had to wrestle with the fact that aspects of Christian doctrine—most crucially, issues of grace and justification—sometimes depended on the tenses, moods, and syntax of one language and could not be rendered perfectly in another. Although the Reformation promised the "literal truth" of the Bible, "the phrase 'literal truth' is at best a paradox, perhaps an oxymoron. What is literal is made up of letters, of words. This expression, then ... depends on a process inevitably interpretative" (5). As Cummings argues, in an age of religious conflict, when so much was at stake, "[l]inguistic solecism could hardly be distinguished from theological error" (10).

Starting from this premise, Cummings traces the interrelationship of grammar and grace through the lives and works of more than a dozen writers in genres that include polemics, sermons, grammatical handbooks, theological treatises, and lyric and epic verse; indeed, every one of the book's ten chapters ranges through multiple authors and genres. Given the work's complicated structure, a bare outline of its organization will have to suffice. Cummings opens with a preliminary section that gives an overview of grammatical study from the Middle Ages into the Renaissance and situates Luther as poised uneasily between scholasticism and humanism. Part 1 focuses on Northern Europe, especially the works of Luther and Erasmus, and examines the vexed relationship between humanism and theology. Part 2 turns to England and the Henrician reformation, considering the rise of vernacular theology and the related rise of vernacular literature; chapters in this section include short excursions on Wyatt's *Penitential Psalms* and Sidney's *Defence of Poesie*. Part 3 considers the after-effects of the Henrician reformation and the Elizabethan settlement, with analyses of Fulke Greville, George Herbert, and Launcelot Andrewes, as well as one chapter entirely on recusant poetry and another on Donne. The book then concludes with an epilogue on the English Revolution and its aftermath, focusing on language and theology in *Paradise Lost*.

Although Cummings' book is dense and difficult to summarize, he is a lovely writer, and each chapter proceeds in what seems an intuitively logical fashion. The book may be dipped into by the casual reader, but it is very much an argumentative whole, and each part benefits from those that come before. Part 3's analyses of the

religious lyrics of Greville, Herbert, Southwell and Donne, for example, build on Cummings' careful examinations of the paradoxical language and theology of Luther and Calvin—as well as the deliberately vague public statements of the Church of England on such issues as predestination—to demonstrate that, although religion in Reformation England *was* divided, the precise lines of its division were not clear (282). Herbert's theology might with equal accuracy be called "Calvinist" and "anti-Calvinist" (324-25), while an understanding of the complex interrelationship of sixteenth-century Calvinism and Catholicism helps to explain why the works of the Jesuit poet Southwell spoke so powerfully to a Protestant audience (333, 364). Cummings suggests that poetry not only reflects the complicated realities of Early Modern theology, but that it might be the only language fully capable of conveying its paradoxes (326-27, 363).

Given the breadth of Cummings' work, the space he dedicates to individual authors is often quite brief: Wyatt gets eight pages, Herbert six, and Milton barely that. But although some readers might understandably wish these sections longer, they are by no means cursory; Cummings shows deep sensitivity to the language and theology of each author he examines, and one senses that he could easily have written an entire chapter on most of them. As it is, *The Literary Culture of the Reformation* is that rarest of scholarly birds: a capacious and richly detailed book that nevertheless maintains a coherent and powerful argument throughout its many pages.

For all its scope, Cummings' book does not pretend to be comprehensive, and one work that it mentions only in passing is the English Prayerbook, otherwise known as the Book of Common Prayer. The Prayerbook is the focus of Timothy Rosendale's *Liturgy and Literature in the Making of Protestant England*, which, like Cummings' book, addresses the interpretative crises of the English Reformation. Rosendale argues that, in contrast to the "chaotic potentiality" of the Bible, the Prayerbook was a force for ecclesiastical and political stability that productively synthesized the tensions of the English Reformation (4, 5). Like the Reformation itself, the Prayerbook was a product of coercive state power that nevertheless permitted and even demanded a striking freedom of individual interpretation (9); as such, it "helped England to navigate the cultural crisis of the Reformation by enfranchising the evangelical subject, and establishing a permanent dialectic in which the authority, and thus the identity, of nation and individual are mutually constituting" (19).

The four main chapters of Rosendale's book are grouped into two pairs. The first pair examines the Prayerbook as an embodiment of the many tensions of the Reformation, while the second considers issues of representation and reading in the works of Sidney, Shakespeare, Milton, and Hobbes, where Rosendale sees the imprint of the Prayerbook's hermeneutics. These two pairs of chapters are bracketed by three historical narratives. The first, which precedes the body chapters, provides background on the English liturgy's origins in medieval and Lutheran sources; the

second, which divides the two halves, deals with the period 1549-1662 and the changes to and changing fortunes of the Prayerbook during those years; and the third, which concludes the text, addresses the vicissitudes of the Prayerbook from 1662 to the present.

The book's first two-thirds are richly rewarding. Rosendale's two opening chapters on the Prayerbook and national identity and the Prayerbook and individual identity are compelling, while the brief interspersed histories are helpful to an understanding of Rosendale's textual analyses, as well as lively and interesting in their own right. Rosendale argues that, although the Prayerbook is a form of order that "implicitly demands a highly regimented subordination of private to public" (34), and thus reinforces a top-down political and ecclesiastical model (34-40, 43), at the same time the Prayerbook *also* valorizes private interpretation (70). Despite the communal setting of the liturgy, many things were still left up to individual interpretation—and nowhere more so than in the Eucharistic rite (84-86, 88).

Commenters before Rosendale have noted how theologically murky the Prayerbook Communion service is, but Rosendale sees this not as a defect or a problem to be solved, but as one of the text's most important elements and one with far-reaching implications. In addition to allowing the individual congregant some theological leeway, the Prayerbook insists that Eucharistic efficacy is at least partly a memorial affair and depends on the active participation of the individual (97-99). Whereas in Catholic theology the sign (the Eucharistic bread and wine) is understood as identical to the signifier (the body of Christ), the Prayerbook encourages a "figurative, interpretive, and *readerly* conception" of the sacrament (107). Although Protestantism has long been associated with a suspicion of representation in all its forms, Rosendale claims that the Prayerbook's Communion liturgy embraces representation, resacralizing the Eucharistic bread and wine as pure sign; this, in turn, leads to "a larger and deeper cultural valorization of representation" in literature and elsewhere (22, 115).

This is a bold and exciting claim, with the potential to shape many future readings of Reformation literature. However, Rosendale's actual extension of this argument to Sidney's *Defence of Poesie*, Shakespeare's history plays, Milton's *Paradise Lost*, and Hobbes's *Leviathan* in his book's final two chapters is disappointing; his analyses of those texts are cursory, and, although generally sound, not terribly original; he also does not succeed in making a convincing link between representation and reading in those works and Eucharistic theology in the Prayerbook. Fortunately, these weaker chapters are followed by a helpful appendix that summarizes and walks through the 1549 Prayerbook, describing its various rites and their sources, and this returns us to the book's chief strength: Rosendale's careful account and sensitive analysis of the Prayerbook as a product and reflection of the English Reformation.

Cummings and Rosendale's works enrich one another, and they profit by being read in tandem. Separately or together, however, each is a notable contribution to the study of literature and religion in Early Modern England.

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