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## Entering "The Church-porch": Herbert and Wisdom Poetry

Carole Kessner

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### In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

Carole Kessner Entering "The Church-porch": Herbert and Wisdom Poetry by Carole Kessner The first section of The Temple, titled "The Churchporch," has always been something of an embarrassment to critics of Herbert's poetry. Long, ponderous, didactic, structurally rigid, sometimes repetitious, it is altogether unlike the intimate, deeply moving, frequently charming, varied lyrics of the devotional second section, "The Church." As Joseph Summers observes, even in his attempt to rescue it, "The Church-porch" is a "462-line didactic poem which violates many popular modern notions concerning both poetry and religion, lying like a large and wordly dragon before the portals."<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, Summers' aim is to convince the reader of the value of the work and of the way in which Herbert "attempted to put the traditional mixture of pleasure and profit to the uses of Christian didactic verse." Furthermore, Summers, and Mary Ellen Rickey after him, suggest that in this section of the poem Herbert points back to pre-Christian times — that is, to "classical

worship in classical temples."<sup>2</sup> Miss Rickey claims that Herbert's "purpose in doing so is to show the ineffable superiority of the Christian religion, which admits the faulty and promises succor to those seeking the life of the spirit."<sup>3</sup> Some of these remarks are quite true — the poem is anomalous, and it does point back to pre-Christian times — but I suggest that the pre-Christian tradition it essentially recalls is not that of the Graeco-Roman civilization, but that of the biblical and inter-testamental, the tradition of the wisdom psalms, the proverbs, and the Wisdom Books. Yet, rather than plunging directly into the rigorous discipline of "The Church-porch," I suggest a gentler, less formidable approach. If we begin with the apparently simple quatrains under the heading "Superliminare" that immediately follow "The Church-porch," we will have much better preparation for the longer poem because, as I hope to show, "Superliminare" is integrally related to "The Church-porch" and to "The Church" as well.

10 HERBERT AND WISDOM poetry Superliminare Thou, whom the former precepts have sprinkled and taught, how to behave Thyself in church; approach, and taste The churches mysticall repast. Avoid, Profanenesse; come not here: Nothing but holy, pure, and cleare, Or that which groneth to be so, May at his perill further go. With regard to "Superliminare," Joseph Summers is quite correct when he sums up the first quatrain as being an explanation of "The Church-porch" as a metaphorical perirrhanterium (sprinkling instrument): "The rules and lessons, the prudential advice and the admonitory language are necessary ... as a perirrhanterium for sprinkling the holy water of ceremonial cleansing before the youth is admitted to the church's 'mystical repast.'" He is also correct in his observation that "the second quatrain is in the form of a spell, forbidding the profane or evil reader or spirit from venturing further."<sup>5</sup> But neither Summers nor any other recent critic has given the two quatrains scrupulously close reading; nor have critics thought very much about the relationship of one quatrain to the other or about their connection to the title "Superliminare." As long ago as Hutchinson's edition, the hint was there, for in his notes on the two quatrains, Hutchinson points out a few extremely suggestive facts.<sup>6</sup> First, he notes that in the earlier W manuscript, the two quatrains appear as separate poems on separate pages. The title "Perirrhanterium" (the "h" was added later) is prefixed to the first quatrain, "Superliminare" to the second. In the β manuscript, however, both quatrains appear on a single page with a double line dividing them, and with "Superliminare" as title for both. "Perirrhanterium" now is shifted to become the sub-title for "The Church-porch." The obvious question is, of course, what<sup>11</sup> Carole Kessner is the significance of this new arrangement? Surely, Herbert would not take the trouble to rearrange two little poems like these, unless he had something quite special in mind. Hutchinson does move in exactly the right direction, but then he abandons the exploration. With regard to the title "Superliminare," Hutchinson tells us to look at the Vulgate, Exodus 12:22. Here, the word "superliminare," meaning lintel, occurs: 22And...

Carole Kessner

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Yet, rather than plunging directly into the rigorous discipline of "The Church-porch," I suggest a gentler, less formidable approach. If we begin with the apparently simple quatrains under the heading "Superliminare" that immediately follow "The Church-porch," we will have much better preparation for the longer poem because, as I hope to show, "Superliminare" is integrally related to "The Church-porch" and to "The Church" as well.





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