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Herrick 's Noble Numbers and the

Politics of Playfulness

WHY did Robert Herrick write *His Noble Numbers*? Readers have frequently been puzzled, as F. W. Moorman was over half a century ago, by the apparent childishness of the poet's conception of Christianity.¹ Despite its title, the collection seems to lay little claim to nobility. Herrick's "pious pieces" are notoriously short-winded, over half of them a mere two to four lines long. Compared to the religious poems of a Donne or a Herbert, they appear thin, flat, and barren of intellectual or psychological complexity. Herrick places much greater emphasis on Christianity's shimmering externals—the glow of candlesticks and the heady odor of incense—than on its substance. The most ambitious of his "noble numbers" are those singled out on the 1647 title page, in which he "sings the Birth of his Christ: and sighes for his *Saviours* suffering on the *Crosse*."² But even these poems curiously reduce the emo-

1. For representative opinions, see F. W. Moorman, *Robert Herrick, A Biographical and Critical Study* (London, 1910), p. 137; Marchette Chute, *Two Gentle Men: The Lives of George Herbert and Robert Herrick* (New York, 1959), pp. 1c—2o5; and John Press, *Robert Herrick* (London, 1961), pp. 31—35. The most useful studies of Herrick's aim in *Noble Numbers* are Robert H. Deming's *Ceremony and Art: Robert Herrick's Poetry* (The Hague, 1974); and Miriam K. Starkman's "Noble Numbers and the Poetry of Devotion," in *Reason and the imagination*, ed. Joseph Mazzeo (New York, 1962). Deming and Starkman recognize that the collection's apparent childishness was a deliberate artistic technique, but do not link its simplicity with contemporary political and religious issues, as I shall here. Studies of *Hesperides* which have been particularly useful for my work include Deming's book; his "Robert Herrick's Classical Ceremony," *ELH*, 34 (1967), 327—48; his "Herrick's Funeral Poems," *Studies in English Literature*, 9 (s69), 153—67; and Daniel H. Woodward, "Herrick's Oberon Poems," *Journal of English and Germanic Philology*, 64 (1965), 270—84.

2. *The Poetical Works of Robert Herrick*, ed. L. C. Martin (Oxford, 1956), p. 337. I must also record my indebtedness to J. Max Patrick's very useful edition, *The Complete Poetry of Robert Herrick* (New York, 1968).

tion-charged events they purport to commemorate: the Nativity becomes a glorified birthday party, and the Crucifixion a stage play performed to the astonishment of its spectators.

The simple piety of *Noble Numbers* is remarkably reminiscent of popular religion in the late Middle Ages. Like carols of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, Herrick brings divinity down to earth, portraying the Son of God as a very human “prettie Babie” who whimpers pitifully when in am and takes great pleasure in baubles. Like the late medieval Corpus Christi cycles, Herrick’s poems replay events from scriptural history as community pageants which unite high pomp and lowly realism. And in keeping with common fifteenth-century practice, he depicts Christian worship as a broadly assimilative blend of popular holiday sports and dances with the liturgy of the Church.

But to cite resemblances with the Middle Ages is not to explain Herrick’s poetic purpose. Medieval authorities were by no means unanimous in condoning mystery plays or holiday merrymaking, and even when they did, it was usually on the grounds that such lively adjuncts to divine worship kindled the devotion of “lewed men.”³ Similarly, scholars have explained late medieval emphasis on the humanity of the Christ Child as part of a widespread campaign to bring new warmth to the faith of those incapable of comprehending theological abstractions.⁴ But why should a highly educated seventeenth-century Anglican like Herrick immerse himself in forms of spirituality primarily intended even by their medieval advocates as aids for the uneducated? In answering this question we will come close to grasping the intent behind *Noble Numbers*. For Herrick did not write such apparently childish verse out of any inability to conjure up something more complex. Indeed, through a paradox which this article will attempt to unravel, it is precisely his utilization of the seemingly banal and childish which alerts us to the “noble” aim behind *His Noble Numbers*.

To begin with, despite the personalized *His* of the collection’s title and individual poems like “*His Ejaculation to God*” and “*His Letanie, to the Holy Spirit*,” it would be a mistake to assume that Herrick’s verse was a private spiritual record in the manner of Donne or Herbert. By happy

3. For medieval opinions on dancing and holiday customs, see G. G. Coulton, *Five Centuries of Religion* (Cambridge, Eng., 1923—so), a, Appendix 23, pp. 526—41; L. Gougaud, “La Danse dans les églises,” *Revue d’histoire ecclésiastique*, 15 (1914), 5—22, 229—45; and Richard Leighton Greene’s introduction to *The Early English Carols* (Oxford, 1935).

4. On the Christ Child in medieval spirituality, see Greene; Emile Male, *L’Art religieux de la fin du moyen age en France* (Paris, 1922), pp. 86—87, 148—50; and Clement A. Miles, *Christmas in Ritual and Tradition* (London, 1913), pp. 26—39.

historical accident, we have evidence suggesting that Herrick may have written simplistically for the same reason medieval popularizers did to enrich the religious life of people whose ignorance left them impervious to more sophisticated appeals. A visitor to the village of Dean Prior in 1809 found that Herrick was still very much alive in local legend, and that his verse had been preserved by oral tradition. Dorothy King, an illiterate local woman in her nineties, had been taught five of Herrick's *Noble Numbers*, including "His Letanie, to the Holy Spirit," by her mother. She "called them her prayers" and said them to herself in bed when she could not sleep. Even at her advanced age, she was able to recite them "with great exactness." Other villagers in 1809 also remembered Herrick poems. If *His Noble Numbers* was intended as a catechism and religious handbook for simple villagers like Dorothy King, then those very characteristics for which Herrick's verses have been dismissed as childish—their brevity, emphasis on easily grasped externals, generalized emotion, and appeal to a love of games and triviality—all could be defended as perfectly appropriate for a humble country audience.

But if Herrick intended *His Noble Numbers* as a compendium for village devotion, why did he so liberally sprinkle the collection with the personal possessive "his"? Why did he, in effect, place himself on the same level as the ignorant parishioners who were to find solace in reciting his poems? In publishing his "pious pieces" in 1648, he made them available to a more sophisticated public for whom their childish simplicity would have carried profound political implications. The apparent *insouciance* of his verse must not blind us to the fact that Herrick wrote during a time of tumultuous upheaval. Just as *Hesperides* chronicles the military progress of the Civil War in such avidly royalist paeans as "To Prince Charles upon his coming to Exeter" and "To the King, upon his welcome to Hampton-Court," so *Noble Numbers* plays royalism in a religious key, affirming Herrick's commitment to the Laudian Anglican vision of an England spiritually united under the benevolent absolutism of the Church.

In the half-century preceding the outbreak of the war, such seemingly innocuous questions as whether prayer should be rote or extemporaneous had become strongly politicized. Elizabethan Non-conformists such as Henry Barrow had condemned the prescribed prayers of the Anglican liturgy as mere babbling childishness in the sight of God: "Shall we think that God hath any time left these his servants so singly furnished and

5. *The Quarterly Review*, 4 (Aug. 1810), Article XI, p. 172.

destitute of his grace, that they cannot find words according to their necessities and faith, to expresse their wantes and desires, but need thus to be taught line unto line, as children new weaned from the breasts, what and when to say, how much to say, and when to make an end; to say this collect at the beginning, that at the end, that before, tother after, this in morning, that at after noone, *etc.* How like children, or rather like masking fooles, are these great clarkes dressed?”⁶ To such sentiments Richard Hook had responded in *Of the Lawes of Ecclesiastical Politie* with a sounding defense of the “long approued customes” of Her Majesty’s Church: “The things which so long experience of all ages hath confirmed and made profitable, let not vs presume to condemne as follies and toyes, because wee sometimes know not the cause and reason of them.”⁷ To abstain from the established liturgy was to flout not only the ecclesiastical hierarchy, but the very monarch who stood at its head.

With the passing of time, the conflict intensified. Seventeenth-century puritans regularly repudiated the set liturgy as senseless babbling, and their Anglican opponents just as regularly retorted that such opinions were a vicious slur upon established authority. The issue was a mid—century commonplace, prominent in pamphlet warfare, and central to the trial of Archbishop Laud. His adversary Lord Say and Seal derided the Church’s set prayers and homilies as mere crutches for legless men, and condemned in the strongest possible terms Laud’s campaign for the rigid enforcement of doctrinal and liturgical conformity. Laud attempted to justify his policies on traditional Anglican grounds: the sanctity of ancient custom and the duty of obedience owed by His Majesty’s subjects.⁸ But he argued in vain. He was executed in 1645, and his church was swept away during the 1640s by a series of Parliamentary decrees.

To educated Englishmen of the Civil War period, Herrick’s *Noble Numbers* would have appeared a clear statement on the issue of conformity—a demonstration of loyalty to the state church then on the verge of apparent extinction. Herrick quite consciously played the simpleton to dramatize his simple submission to traditional authority. Indeed, *Noble Numbers* out-Lands Laud, carrying the conservative Anglican emphasis on

6. *The Writings of Henry Barrow: 1587—1590*, ed. Leland H. Carlson (London, 1962), p. 364 (*A Brief Discoverje of the False Church*).

7. *Of the Lawes of Ecclesiastical Politic* (London, i6ii), Bk. 4, p. 129.

8. William Laud, *Liturgy, Episcopacy and Church Ritual* (Oxford, 1840), p. et passim. For general studies of the issue, see William Holden Hutton, *The English Church from the Accession of Charles I to the Death of Anne, 1625—1714* (London, 1903); and Christopher Hill, *Society and Puritanism in Pre—Revolutionary England* (New York, 1964).

set forms and doctrinal uniformity to its furthest possible limit. In its song pattern, its endless repetition of moral and theological platitudes Herrick's verse borders on parody of the intonations of the liturgy, but without being at all parodic in its intent. If anti-authoritarian pamphleteers attacked the set forms as babbling childishness, Herrick refuted them with childishness, expressing through the naive, unquestioning tone of poems the absolute, unquestioning loyalty Englishmen owed their beleaguered church.

But *Noble Numbers* is a broader and more systematic defense of the Anglican supremacies than the single issue of conformity would suggest. Herrick does not merely regret lost unanimity, he recreates a lost world—an idealized “Merry England” frolicking in traditional pastimes and touched by the vexing controversies which troubled a decidedly unmerry England at mid-century. Yet to write about playfulness does not preclude serious intent. Herrick has too often been considered a mere transcriber of ethnographic data, a jolly little man who sat under a tree taking no notice while the peasants cavorted about him. This image, however seductive, skirts a few awkward realities: the age-old mumblings and festivals celebrated in Herrick's verse were disappearing even as he wrote, under the pressure of economic change; where they did survive, such customs were under strong Puritan attack; and by the time Herrick was ejected from Dean Prior for royalism in 1647, they had been suppressed so effectively that a man could be put in the stocks for allowing even his child to dance on Sundays. The “Merry England” of Herrick's verse is no literal portrait, but a highly deliberate artistic construct. By placing such emphasis on holiday mirth and celebration, Herrick did not just write enticingly pleasant poetry: he created a highly skilled piece of political propaganda—a glorification of the delights of England past based on a reasoned refutation of those rebellious “Puritaines” who were suppressing such delights in England present.

The term “Puritanism” is indeed, as Christopher Hill has remarked, “an admirable refuge from clarity of thought,”⁹ yet indispensable if only through its seventeenth-century ubiquitousness. Authorities on the subject may differ over details, but generally agree in applying the term to a range of religious experience marked by great emphasis on original sin, insistence that each Christian must pursue his own salvation, and hostility to claims of royal absolutism and enforced liturgical uniformity as hindering this

9. Hill, p. 13.

individual striving for righteousness. Thus understood, Puritanism is a ion of work, of deadly earnest struggle against evil. Calvin defined sin as a “perverseness and corruption of our nature, powred abroad into all the parts of the soul,” which never ceases, but “continually bringeth foorth new fruits.”¹⁰ So corrupt is man’s will that he cannot remedy this fundamental depravity under his own power. The Calvinist doctrine of predestination allowed an individual no hope that his efforts could influence his spiritual destiny. And yet constant struggle against his own wicked nature was considered evidence of election—a belief mocked in the royalist rumor that Cromwell himself once “had striven so hard with the Lord in the privacy of his room that his tears trickled out under the door.”¹¹ A true Christian was no passive weakling, but a fighter in the wilderness of vice. Although John Milton was too varied and capacious a thinker to be readily labeled “Puritan,” his *Areopagitica* powerfully distills the message of countless Puritan sermons and tracts: “I cannot praise a fugitive and cloistered virtue, unexercised and unbreathed, that never sallies out and sees her adversary, but slinks out of the race where that immortal garland is to be run for, not without dust and heat.”¹²

In the benign universe of *Noble Numbers*, by deliberate contrast, the problem of evil is so miniaturized and trivialized that it loses its terrible urgency. Herrick rejects Puritanism on the bedrock level of doctrine by downplaying the corruption of human nature. If man errs, it is not through innate sinfulness, but through a lapse of will (see “*The Will the cause of Woe*”); and even the will is upright enough to turn away from wickedness. Herrick’s “pious pieces” mock Calvinist predestination with tile argument that no sinner is incapable of self—regeneration:

Predestination is the Cause alone
Of many standing, but offal! to none. (“*Predestination*”)

Art thou not destin’d? then, with hast, go on
To make thy faire *Predestination*:
If thou canst change thy life, God then will please
To change, or call back, His past *Sentences*. (“*Another*”)

10. John Calvin, *The Institution of Christian Reli5ion*, trans. Thomas Norton (London, 1611), p. 1o8.

11. C. V. Wedgwood, *The Life of Cromwell* (New York, 1966), p. ii8. Puritan interpretation of the doctrine of predestination is illuminated in William Haller, *The Rise of Puritanism* (New York, 19w), ch. III, esp. p. 88.

12.. John Milton, *Complete Prose Works*, ed. Douglas Bush, et al.,II (New Haven, Conn., 1959), 515.

Even if committed, an evil act need not be repeated, for:

God, who me gives a will for to repent,
Will add a power, to keep me innocent;
That I shall ne're that trespasse recommit,
When I have done true Penance here for **it**. (“*To God*”)

Like human sinfulness, divine retribution is emptied of its terror. God’, punishments are like whippings administered to a recalcitrant schoolboy and even the netherworld itself holds little menace:

Hell is no other, but a soundlesse pit,
Where no one beame of comfort peeps in **it**. (“*Hell*”)

Given the accommodating doctrine of *Noble Numbers*, man can and should preserve his “fugitive and cloistered virtue” against contact with evil. Since wickedness is to be avoided, not battled and overcome, Herrick had no use for strenuous spiritual combat. In opposition to the Puritan religion of work, he fashioned a religion of play, of retreat from all conflict into a realm of games and celebration.

Johan Huizinga has defined play as a “free activity standing quite consciously outside ‘ordinary’ life as being ‘not serious,’ but at the same time absorbing the player intensely and utterly. It is an activity connected with no material interest, and no profit can be gained by it. It proceeds within its own proper boundaries of time and space according to fixed rules and in an orderly manner.”¹⁴ By Huizinga’s definition, play is by no means incompatible with religious ritual. The liturgy draws its participants out of the ordinary workaday world and into its own timeless realm. Its infinitely varied patterns of speech and gesture cannot be explained in terms of a concrete purpose: they fulfill no goal but the creation of ordered beauty for the glory of God. As Romano Guardini has pointed out, the liturgy’s very aim is teaching the value of aimlessness, “teaching the soul not to see purposes everywhere, not to be too conscious of the end it wishes to attain. ...It must learn not to be continually yearning to *do* something, to attack something, to accomplish something useful, but to play the divinely ordained game of the liturgy in liberty and beauty and holy joy before God.”¹⁵

13. See, for example, “*God has a two—fold part*,” p. 343; “*Whips*,” p. 343; “*Tears*,” p. 379 “*To God*,” p. 393; “*The Staffe and Rod*,” p. 394; and “*To God*,” p. 398.

14. *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play—Element in Culture* (Boston, 1968), p. 13.

15. Romano Guardini, *The Church and the Catholic and the Spirit of the Liturgy*, trans. Ada Lane (New York, n.d.), pp. 183—84.

Such an interpretation of ritual is by no means new. Seventeenth—century puritans saw Anglican ceremonialism in precisely Guardini’s terms and condemned it for those very characteristics Guardini cites in its praise: beautifully ordered aimlessness and deliberate irrelevance to the pressing business of life. Prebendary Smart complained of services instituted at Durham Cathedral by Cosin, “Our young Apollo repaireth the quire, and ctS t out gaily with strange Babylonish ornaments; the hallowed priests dance about the altar, making pretty sport and fine pastime with trippings and turnings and crossing and crouching.”⁶ For the Puritans, play and religious experience most emphatically did not mix. Philip Stubbes ar1 ed, “we must giue accounts at ye day of iudgment of euery minut and iote of time, from the day of our birth to the time of our death: for there is nothing more precious, then time, which is giuen vs to glorifie God in good woorks, and not to spend in luxurious exercises after our fantasies and delights.”¹⁷ Even the moderate Richard Baxter admonished, “Lose not heaven by trifling. Pray not in jest, and resist not sin in jest, lest you be damned in good sadness. When you are at work for eternity, it is time to do it with all your might.”⁸ And a dozen other quotations could be amassed to the same effect: time was meant not to be abandoned through the transcendent harmonies of ritual, but spent in profitable labor toward the goal of righteousness.

On the same grounds that they condemned the liturgy itself, Puritans also denounced surviving remnants of pre-Reformation religious festivals—the “*Morrice—daunces, Bontfires, Newyeeres—gjfts, Newyeeres—dayes, Diuina—Lions, Lotteries, Mummings, Dancings, Healthes, Tapers,*”¹⁹ and kindred foффies with which Englishmen had traditionally celebrated the high feasts of the liturgical year. Such abuses were at best mere time—wasting child’s play, devilish distractions from the earnest prayer and self-examination which was the duty of Christians on the Sabbath. Christmas came under particular censure, in part because its emphasis on Christ as a helpless infant invited jesting dishonor of the majesty of God; in part because it was the festival most heavily laden with corrupt celebrations. As William Prynne sighed in trenchant irony of the first Christmas, “alas these precise

16. Quoted in Hutton, p. sot. See also Richard Baxter, *The Practical Works* (London, 1838), I, 153 (*Christian Directory*, Partx, ch. iii).

17. Phillip Stubbes, *The Anatomie of Abuses* (London, 1583), fol. N.

18. Baxter, xv, gj.t5 (*The Vain Religion of the Formal Hypocrite*).

19. William Prynne, *Histrion-Mastix* (London, 1633), p. 24. Further quotations from this edition will be indicated by page number in the text.

puritanicall Angels, Saints and shepherds (as some I feare account them knew no such pompous pagan Christmas Courtships or solet which the Divell and his accursed instruments have since appropriated t' his most blessed Nativitie. *Here we have nothing but Glory be to God on h h on earth peace, good will towards men:* this is the Angels, the Shepherds o Christmas Caroll . . . *yea this is the onely Christmas solemnity that the blesj Saints and Angels now observe in heaven*" (p. 768). And if such restraint practiced among the heavenly Elect, it was certainly required of the earthly.

But the author of *Histrion—mastix* reserves his sharpest whip for the darken of all such abuses—the perversion of divine writ in "Theatricall interludes." All dramatic performances were for Prynne "toys and childish vanities, as if we were created only to play and follow sports" (pp. 304 os), "Wherefore they are rightly called Playes from playing, because they teach men onely to play away their time" (p. Men flock to them "*thicke and threefold*" on festival days which should be times of prayerful sobriety. Prynne found plays on religious subjects particularly abominable. The late medieval mystery plays had faded from the land by the time he wrote, the latest on record an isolated London performance of the Passion before the Spanish ambassador on a Good Friday sometime between 1613 and 1622.²⁰ Deprived of contemporary indigenous examples, Prynne vents his scorn upon Continental equivalents, condemning them with the noteworthy argument that they are a mere extension of the play of the Mass itself: "As they have turned the Sacrament of Christs body and blood into a Masse—play; so they have likewise *trans-formed their Masse itselfe, together with the whole story of Clirists birth, his life, his Passion, and all other parts of their Ecclesiasticall service into Stage—playes*" (p. 112). "A sufficient testimony, how little Papists really estimate the bitter Passion of our blessed Saviour, since they make a common Play or pastime of it" (p. us).

In Herrick's England, the controversy over traditional holiday pastimes carried political implications as weighty and wide—ranging as did the controversy over liturgical conformity. Medieval society had been a federation of hierarchical communities from the lowliest country parish to the royal court__communities whose cohesiveness was cemented and given

20. E. K. Chambers, *The Medieval Stage* (Oxford, 1903), II, 382. Harold Gardiner, in *Mysteries' End: An Investigation of the Last Days of the Medieval Religious Stage* (New Haven Conn., 1946), p. 6, suggests that isolated parish plays may have been performed until late in the seventeenth century. It is tempting to speculate that Herrick himself may have arranged such a performance at Dean Prior.

outward embodiment through shared holiday ceremonies. But already by beginning of the sixteenth century, town guilds and agrarian corn—communes had begun to break up under the impact of expanding commercial- and agricultural innovation. And as Christopher Hill has so master— fully demonstrated, the ideological justification for such atomization was provided by the Puritans, with their emphasis on individual effort and their abhorrence for all ceremonialism.²¹ In attacking the traditional games and festivities which cemented parish unity the Puritans were undermining the basic administrative unit of Anglican Church and British Government both. Richard Hooker had clearly recognized this, arguing that to allow dissenters to abstain from church festivals would result in “Anarchie and meere confusion” and the overthrow of “kingdomes, Churches, and what is nowe through the providence of God by authoritie and power vpheld.”²²

James I and Charles I sought to restore the Church’s lost unity by restoring its age-old customs. The *Book of Sports*, published in 1618 and renewed in 1633, condemned the suppression of traditional merrymaking by “Puritanes and Precisians,” commanded bishops to “strike equally on both hands, against the contemners of Our Authority, and aduersaries of Our Church” by requiring religious conformity, and specified “That after the end of Diuine Seruice, Our good people be not disturbed, letted, or discouraged from any lawful recreation, Such as dauncing, either men or women, Archery for men, leaping, vaulting, or any other such harmelesse Recreation, nor from hauing of May-Games, Whitson Ales, and Morris-dances... . And that women shall haue leaue to carry rushes to the Church for the decoring of **it**, according to their old customs.”²³ Intended to draw England back toward unity, the *Book of Sports* actually split **it** even further, shocking not only Puritans but also many otherwise dutiful Anglicans with its advocacy of Sunday game-playing.

The *Book of Sports* did, of course, have defenders from within the church hierarchy. John Pocklington argued in a **1636** sermon that the real profaners of the holy day were not those who kept **it** in feasting and “harmelesse recreations” but those who refused.²⁴ Peter Heylyn’s *The History of*

21. See in particular Hill’s chapter “Individuals and Communities.”

22. Hooker, Bk. 5, p. 381.

23. *The Kings Majesties Declaration to His Subjects, Concerning lawful! Sports to be vsed* (London, 1633), pp. 10—12. Reactions to the *Book of Sports* are studied in Hill, pp. 193—200, and Hutton, pp. 107—09.

24. *Sunday No Sabbailt* (London, 1636), p. 37.

the Sabbath (1636) surveyed opinion among early Christian and medieval Church Fathers to prove the Church's historical advocacy of Sunday and holiday games and to defend Charles I's "pious and Princely Act" in issuing the *Book of Sports*.²⁵ Gilbert Ironside argued in a 1637 treatise dedicated to Laud that holiday dancing and festivities, however base in themselves, "should be used by a Christian man in obedience unto God who hath imposed them upon us: and with faith in his promises to sanctify them unto us, accompanied with an unfained desire to glorify God in them, and for them, they begin to change their natures, and are no more base and vile, but honourable and glorious."²⁶ But the most eloquent apologist for traditional festivity was the poet Robert Herrick. The most elaborate of *His Noble Numbers* assert the sanctity of playfulness by making a game of Christianity: reducing ceremonialism to its play essence, and expanding this essence into a medievalized version of Anglicanism, a deliberate glorification of those base "*Newyears—dayes,*" "*Dancings,*" and "*Theatrical! interludes*" condemned by contemporary Puritans.

"*To his Saviour. The New yeers gift*" provides a good example of Herrick's rhetorical technique. He vindicates a traditional holiday custom by making it the only appropriate response to divine grace:

That little prettie bleeding part
Of Foreskin send to me:
And Ile returne a bleeding Heart,
For New-yeers gift to thee.
Rich is the Jemme that thou did'st send,
Mine's faulty too, and small:
But yet this Gift Thou wilt commend,
Because I send Thee *all*.

The real subject of this ditty is, of course, Christ's sacrifice on the Cross, prefigured in the blood of the Circumcision, and the Christian's sacrifice of himself in return. Herrick begins with Christian doctrine, but whittles down even its most soberly awesome tenet to a pleasant little game with the Christ Child. And not just any game, but an exchange of New Year's gifts—one of the very holiday customs denounced by the Puritans as vile survivals of paganism. God in his grace was the first New Year's gift-giver, sending his Son as a free offering to restore fallen humanity. Holiday gift-giving among Christians is an *imitatio dei*, a symbolic commemoration

25. *The History of the Sabbath* (London, 1636), Bk. 2, p. 269.

26. *Seven Questions of the Sabbath* (Oxford, 1637), p. 236.

of this first and greatest gift; the poet's offering to the Christ Child is not a lal or sacrilegious act, but the truest possible demonstration of his thankfi.il acceptance of divine grace.

Herrick's Christmas carols foiiow a similar pattern, refuting Puritan opinion against "profane" dance and ceremony by assimilating these play— into the pattern of divine action on earth and locating their source in God himself. In writing Christmas carols, the poet was participating in a brief seventeth-century revival of a dying medieval form. The carol began as a pagan round dance, its lyrics usually secular and of folk origin. But in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, particularly under Franciscan influence, the carol's traditional gaiety was transmuted into an expression of Christian joy and praise.²⁷ In seventeenth—century England, the form gained a political dimension: its revival was sparked by the *Book of Sports* controversy and vehement Puritan opposition to such "pompous pagan solemnities." So many carols were composed as demonstrations of loyalty to Charles I that one hapless eighteenth-century editor suggested the king's name *Carolus* as the origin of the word *carol*.²⁸ In doing so he was confusing the carol's last days with its beginnings. The editors of the *Oxford Book of Carols* date the form's demise to Herrick's **1647** ejection from Dean Prior, making the poet of *Noble Numbers* the last noteworthy writer of carols in England.²⁹

In "A Christmas Caroll, sung to the King in the Presence at White—Hall" and "The Star—Song: A Carol! to the King; sung at White-Hall" the holiday gaiety traditionally associated with the carol becomes a Christmas gift to the Christ Child. Herrick's lyrics reenact the discovery of the newborn child, so that the actual dancing of the carol becomes a joyously appropriate response to theophany. The singers of "A Christmas Caroll" play biblical shepherds, marveling that the winter fields are suddenly infused with mildness, seeking its source, and finding the Child. Then players and spectators mingle in the "publike mirth" of the dance and fete the Child with traditional Christmas observances:

...and bequeath
This Hollie, and this Ivie Wreath,
To do Him honour; who's our King,
And Lord of all this Revelling.

27. Greene, pp. cxi—cxxxii.

28. Greene, p. xxix.

29. *The Oxford Book of Carols*, ed. Percy Dearmer, R. Vaughan Williams, and Martin Shaw (London, 1931), p. xii.

“*The Star—Song*” follows a similar pattern. The singers, latter—day Magi seek the Child, offer him gifts, then dance a round and wassail th “prettie Twelfth—Tide King.”

The font of all the gaiety is Christ himself. As the singers of “A Chrj3t,, Caroll” proclaim, his

...quickning Birth
Gives life and luster, publike mirth,
To Heaven, and the under-Earth.

The Nativity not only brought the promise of redemption, it also breathed into the universe the new brilliance and liveliness of divine grace. In the same manner, its reenactment fills participants and spectators with a renewed awareness of God’s grace to be played out in the “publike mirth” of dances, wreath-crownings, and wassailing. Grace falls like regenerating sun and rain—“Turnes all the patient ground to flowers” (p.364). In crowning the Child with holly and ivy—those plants which remain green even in the bleakness of winter—the carolers are restoring to God natural symbols of the spiritual renewal brought by Christ’s birth. Given their divine inspiration, the Yuletide customs reenacted in Herrick’s poetry are not simply acceptable, they are necessary; for God—given joy must be returned to its source through the praise of public merriment. To shun the play spirit appropriate to the holidays, as seventeenth—century Puritans did, would be to break a divinely ordained circle of reciprocity.

Herrick’s carols were sung not only to the King of Heaven but also, as their titles specify, to the King of England. They close lauding “the King” without clearly stating which one—a graceful equivocation based on symbolic identity, since Charles was considered God’s anointed representative on earth. To honor one was to do homage to both:

Let’s blesse the Babe: And, as we sing
His praise; so let us blesse the *King*. (“*Another New—yeers Gift*”)

As Christ brought joy to the world, so Charles has been the channel by which it reaches England, fostering its free expression through his support for the “publike mirth” of festival. Herrick’s carols are, like the ceremonies they describe, richly patterned gifts to the Christ Child. But they are also thank-offerings to the king for his efforts to preserve traditional communal ceremonies in the face of Puritan attack. The carols do not just paint a seductive vision of courtiers and shepherds dancing in harmonious unity before Christ Child and king: Herrick’s poems call upon his contemporaries to join the sacred dance, to restore a lost image of order by leaving dissension behind and rallying around their monarch.

The celebratory poems discussed thus far recapitulate the prose defense of the *Book of Sports*: the holiday customs advocated in that proclamation, however base and silly in themselves, have their origin and goal in God and are sanctified by him. In his Good Friday poems, Herrick carries his apologia for the play spirit one step beyond the *Book of Sports*, turning the crucifixion itself into sacred game. “*Good Friday: Rex Tragicus, or Christ to His Crosse*” lowers Christ to the level of a mere dramatic actor in ‘rder to refute Puritan opinion and demonstrate the sacred potential of the dramatic impulse—its power to lift mortals of any time and place into a timeless ritual pattern. Herrick addresses the Son of God as a pageant manager would coach a performer:

The *Crosse* shall be Thy *Stage*; and Thou shalt there
The spacious field have for Thy *Theater*.
Thou art that *Roscius*, and that markt—out man,
That must this day act the Tragedian,
To wonder and affrightment...

As the performance progresses, drama will be transmuted into public ceremonial: the viewers will themselves become actors, mourning the death of their Player—King and performing his funeral rites:

Why then begin, great King! ascend Thy Throne,
And thence proceed, to act Thy Passion
To such an height, to such a period rais’d,
As Hell, and Earth, and Heav’n may stand amaz’d.
God, and good Angells guide Thee; and so biesse
Thee in Thy severall parts of bittemesse;
That those, who see Thee nail’d unto the Tree,
May (though they scorn Thee) praise and pitie Thee.
And we (Thy Lovers) while we see Thee keep
The Lawes of Action, will both sigh, and weep;
And bring our Spices, to embalm Thee dead;
That done, wee’l see Thee sweetly buried.

Christ follows the rules of his art, as any good actor should. It is his fidelity to the “Lawes of Action” which gives the play its emotional impact and inspires the participation of its spectators. What better rebuff of Puritan play-scourgers than to make Christ himself not only master—player, but playwright?

this *Scene* from Thee takes life and sense,
And soule and spirit, plot, and excellence.

As in the Christmas carols, communal worship is inspired by an outflowing of divine grace. Even those spectators who “scorn” Christ are drawn

into “praise and pitie” alongside the devout. Herrick vindicates his re-
transformation of New Testament history—and religious ceremonial
general—by positing Christ as its moral center, creator of the laws of action
which govern its performance.

“Rex Tragicus,” heading the series of Good Friday poems which close
Noble Numbers, defines the poetic method of the rest. Along with other
imagined worshipers, Herrick contemplates and joins in the ritual reen-
actment of Christ’s condemnation, journey to Calvary, death, and
entombment. The series is climaxed by the two-part poem “*His Anthem to
Christ on the Crosse*.” The first part establishes a community of sorrowing
worshipers who stand beneath the Cross like Mary and John, expressing
through verse and chorus their pain and gratitude for Christ’s sacrifice. The
second part of the poem invites the reader to join this community. The poet
not only delineates the wonders to be played upon “*This Cro.. Tree here*,”
but recreates the sight of the Cross in the poem’s shape on the page, thus
transforming the page itself into a “stage” on which the reader can “see” the
pageant of the Crucifixion.

Despite classical elements, Herrick’s “passion play” is thoroughly
medieval in spirit. In the fifteenth-century cycles, drama is conceived as
game a notion stated with admirable directness in the Proclamation to the
Ludus Coventriae:

Now haue we told zow all be-dene
The hool mater bat we thynke to play
whan Jat 3e come)er xal ze sene
this game wel pleyd in good a-ray
Of holy wrytte bis game xal bene
and of no fablys be no way...

Shattering grief was not considered incompatible with playfulness.
Medieval audiences were treated, along with the pitiful sight of Christ
crucified, to the macabre jests of his torturers; in “*Rex Tragicus*” Herrick,
too, notes with wry humor “that sowre Fellow, with his *vineger*.” Christ
himself was frequently hailed, much in the manner of Herrick, as a
player—a king riding his horse (the Cross) to a jousting match with the
Devil.³⁰ To make play of biblical history was to remove it from time, to
abolish the chronological and geographical distance between first-century
Judea and

30. *Ludus Coventriae*, ed. K. S. Block (London, 1922), p. 16 (EETS, es. 120). See
also *The Chester Plays*, ed. Hermann Deimling (London, 1892), p. 2 (EETS, e.s. 62).

31. See V. A. Kolve’s admirable study *The Play Called Corpus Christi* (Stanford,
Calif., 1966), ch. viii: “The Passion and Resurrection in Play and Game.”

Fifteenth-century England. The drama was not a commemoration of deeds from the past, but a welding of past and present in which sacred events were enacted as though for the first time. This is precisely the spirit recaptured in the Good Friday poems of Herrick. History dissolves into ceremony into the great circle of liturgical festival, where it is replayed year by year as a palpable proof of unbroken identity with the distant past.

The Good Friday poems are by no means *Noble Numbers*' only echoing of medieval drama. Even more than on the Crucifixion, Herrick dwells on the Nativity. As we have seen, his Christmas carols are cast in dramatic form. "*To his Saviour, a Child; a Present, by a child*" is still closer to the cycle plays in its interpenetration of the sacred and the mundane. Medieval adoration plays characteristically culminate in the non-biblical episode of the shepherds' offering to the Christ Child. The shepherds approach him in mingled reverence and affection, and present him with fittingly puerile gifts. In the Chester Shepherds' Play, after the three shepherds have offered a ball, porridge dish, and cap, their four boys follow suit. The first pleads poverty:

Nowe, lord, for to give thee have I nothinge,
neither gold, silver, brooch, ore ringe,
nor noe rich robes meete for a kinge,
that I have here in store.
But though hit lacke a stopple,
take thee here my well fayre bottle,
for yt will hold a good pottle:
in fayth, I can give thee noe more.

The second and third bring hood and pipe; then the fourth boy comes forward:

Nowe, chylde, although thou be comen from God,
and bee thyselfe god in thy manhoode,
yett I knowe that in thy chyldehood
thow will for sweetmeat looke.
To pull dowite apples, payres, and ploomes
I give thee here my nut hooke.³²

Herrick's poem so matches the tender pragmatism of the four Chester shepherd boys that it could have served as pre-performance coaching for a fifth:

Go prettie child, and beare this Flower
Unto thy little Saviour;

32. Quoted from the convenient collection *English Nativity Plays*, ed. Samuel B. Hemingway (New York, 1909), pp. 64–65.

And tell Him, by that Bud now blown,
He is the *Rose of Sharon* known:
When thou hast said so, stick it there
Upon his Bibb, or Stomacher:
And tell Him, (for good handsell too)
That thou hast brought a Whistle new,
Made of a clean strait oaten reed,
To charme his cries, (at time of need:)
Tell Him, for Corall, thou hast none;
But if thou hadst, he sho'd have one;
But poore thou art, and knowne to be
Even as moniesse, as He. (“*To his Saviour, a Child*”)

Coral would be a particularly welcome gift for the Infant Jesus because it was thought to help children in teething: a bit of sentimental realism remarkably close to the homely piety of the fifteenth-century shepherds' plays. As in the medieval plays, humble household objects from the English countryside are glorified and anchored to eternal verities by the exalted purpose to which they are put. Past and present coalesce. Herrick instructs the child as though the Christ to be honored through his little performance had just then been born in England—as in a sense he had, through ritual's power to transcend ordinary space and time.

For seventeenth-century Puritans, time was not to be escaped, but used to advantage. And as students of Puritanism, from Max Weber to R. H. Tawney to Christopher Hill have tirelessly noted, the work ethic was by no means confined to the sphere of private devotion. As the godly strove to combat the effects of original sin in themselves, so they struggled to destroy all remnants of popish idolatry in England at large; if they struggled hard enough, all such corruptions would eventually be eradicated. Herrick, by reviving medieval ritualism in its most playfully outrageous dramatic form, offered one of the most seductive Royalist arguments against Puritan anti—archaism. The ceremonialism of the past was no heathenish abomination, but an ideal prototype receding alarmingly under Puritan attack with each passing year, a timeless model which, if followed, would restore England to political unity, stasis, and magical insulation against the all—too—evident ravages of “*Times trans—shifting.*”

And yet, ever as he created *His Noble Numbers* Herrick recognized the futility of assuming that his art—or even the royalism celebrated in his art—was destined to restore the timeless model of the past. *His Noble Numbers* terminates on a note of profound pessimism. The Good Friday poems which end the collection trace Christ's descent from the Cross into the

grave, and from there to the harrowing of Hell. But it is a descent not followed by ascent—a Crucifixion and burial without an Easter Resurrection. And this despite the fact that Easter was second only to Christmas as time for traditional holiday merriment of the sort advocated in the *Book* and the tracts of its defenders: Jack of Lent was turned out of doors feasts were prepared amidst general rejoicing, and even the sun was popularly believed to dance for joy. None of these customs is portrayed in *Noble Numbers*. Instead, Herrick's attention is fixed on the sepulchre where he vows to remain and die:

Let me live ever here, and stir
No one step from this *Sepulcher*.
Ravisht I am! and down I lie,
Confus'd, in this brave Extasie.
Here let me rest; and let me have
This for my *Heaven*, that was Thy *Grave*:
And, coveting no higher sphere,
I'le my Eternitie spend here.
(*"To his Sai'iour's Sepulcher: his Devotion"*)

In the final poem of the series, he beholds the stone rolled away but fails, as did the three Mary's before him, to recognize that Christ is risen:

Hence they have born my Lord: Behold! the Stone
Is rowl'd away; and my sweet Saviour's gone!
Tell me, white Angell; what is now become
Of Him, we lately seal'd up in this Tombe?
Is He, from hence, gone to the shades beneath,
To vanquish Hell, as here He conquer'd Death?
If so; I'le thither follow, without feare;
And live in Hell, if that my *Christ* stayes there.
(*"His coming To the Sepulcher"*)

But unlike the three Mary's, he never encounters the risen Christ. Instead of the bright Paschal celebrations we might expect from such an advocate of "publike mirth," *His Noble Numbers* ends in the melancholy shades of the underworld. These final poems move from the stasis of ritual observance to another and more permanent form of timelessness—the stasis of death.

Given the collection's purpose, such a closing may appear puzzling, to say the least. But Herrick was too self-conscious an artist to have omitted the festival embodiment of Christianity's central miracle through mere inadvertence. Rather, he was dramatizing through his own projected descent into oblivion what he saw as the fate of England herself were she to

allow her traditional public festivals to disappear. *His Noble Numbers* ends in solemn warning. At the same time, Herrick's pessimistic closing demonstrates the poet's recognition that his warning may well go unheeded. As a recent paper by Claude J. Summers has pointed out, the Royalist panegyrics in *Hesperides* subtly convey an awareness of the vulnerability of the king's cause beneath their surfaces of triumphant celebration. Herrick casts a similar shadow across *Noble Numbers*. He was all too conscious of the frailty of the Merry England ideal, and that consciousness gives great depth and urgency to his argument for the traditional forms and festivals of Anglicanism.

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33. "Herrick's Political Poetry: The Strategies of His Art," forthcoming in *Trust to Good Verses: Herrick Tercentenary Essays*, ed. Roger B. Rollin and J. Max Patrick (Pittsburgh, Pa., 1977).