Made Flesh: Sacrament and Poetics in Post-Reformation England.
Kimberly Johnson.
Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2014. 238 pp. $59.95.

This book pitches its critical camp on the surface of poems. Its argument resists readings for which words in their material arrangement yield to discursive meaning — the what, rather than the how, of poetry. The devotional verse of George Herbert, John Donne, Edward Taylor, and Richard Crashaw is, according to varying strategies as explained across four dense chapters, "anti-absorbitive" (a term deployed frequently throughout). It is very exciting to read analyses of early modern sacramental verse by a critic who is also an accomplished poet. But Kimberly Johnson's plain assertion that "poetry *matters*" (165) arrives at the conclusion of a study whose larger and more doubtful claim seems to be that the material stuff of poetry matters in ways entirely divorced from its semantic content. Poetic signs are "objects as such — that is, objects in which significance inheres" (23).

This assertion is not borne out by the readings. How could it be? For its logical end is that words mean nothing beyond their material being as signs. If it is true, there is nothing more to say (as opposed to utter or sound-make or page-mark). But the effort to remain fixed to this surface — and this is the book's real value — places tremendous pressure on the point where the matter and referential substance of language converge, which is precisely the issue at stake in Reformation debates pertaining to the nature of the sacramental sign and its power to effect communion with the divine. Several studies over the last couple of decades have addressed this very issue (by Judith Anderson, Ryan Netzley, and Gary Kuchar, to name a few). Johnson's contribution is at once riskier, and less convincing.

Johnson pays less attention to material poetics than we are led to expect initially. Where she does attend to it, her readings are sometimes strained. She makes much, for example, of a horizontal rule separating the two stanzas of Herbert's poem "Superliminare," but neglects to mention its absence from both manuscript witnesses to *The Temple* or that the first edition in which it does appear, care of the Cambridge printers Thomas Buck and Roger Daniel, was published posthumously. Though the author of "Easter Wings" and "The Altar" was concerned with the "space, . . . form," and "physical presence of poetry on the page" (62), "Superliminare" seems a doubtful instance. Another surface reading pertains to a supposed pun, derived from early modern printing convention, in which the initial *s* of "suck" in Crashaw's epigram "Luke 11" is the Latin long form, so that the line in which the word occurs could be read as "Then the mother must fuck the son" (142). Though one is reluctant to state for certain whether early modern readers, accustomed to the long-*s* form (frequently if not almost always used for the initial lowercase), would have been attuned to this visual pun, it is perhaps understandable that a modern critic concerned with the materiality of verse would gravitate toward it.

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Johnson is surely right to claim that "the stable of unsublimable, self-asserting flourishes of technique that we have come, in our enlightened postmodernity, to think of as *poetics* was effectively developed four hundred years ago by devotional poets" (33) — and to argue, moreover, that the development of this poetics paralleled (and perhaps even originated in) theological thinking about the capacity of sacred signs to communicate their referents. However, though she mentions, citing Jonathan Culler and Northrop Frye, the semantically constitutive importance of "rhythm and sound patterning," or *melos* (music), and the visual dimension, or *opsis*, of poetry (160), Johnson has written a book that asserts more than demonstrates the significance of this facet of the material poetics she would champion. Nevertheless, the actual readings — which, despite their theoretical framework, rely heavily on the referential properties of the very signs they interrogate — are often highly illuminating. Particularly notable is the chapter on Edward Taylor. A relatively minor poet, Taylor nonetheless engages in a process of self-feminization that is unique among male writers of the period for its role in foregrounding a tension, discussed repeatedly throughout this book, between doubt and faith about the efficacy of signs in the performance of spiritual communion.

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