

GEORGE HERBERT, MAGDALENE HERBERT,  
AND LITERARY BIOGRAPHY

Janis Lull

Readers of George Herbert often make the not unreasonable assumption that Magdalene Herbert, the only parent the poet knew during his childhood, must have had some influence on his poetry. While the Greek and Latin memorial verses Herbert wrote when his mother died were undoubtedly written about her or at least for her, no documentary evidence survives to show how Mrs. Herbert may have inspired or affected her son's English poems. In the absence of such evidence, biographical writers have tried to reconstruct the connections between Mrs. Herbert and *The Temple* in several ways, none of them completely satisfactory. A closer look at some of these writers suggests that literary biography may have brought us no closer to understanding how, if at all, George Herbert's mother influenced *The Temple* than we were when Izaak Walton published his *Life of Herbert* at the end of the seventeenth century.

Walton's biography clearly serves as a source for the observations of later scholars about Herbert and his mother. As David Novarr's classic study of *The Making of Walton's "Lives"* has shown, Walton approached the major challenge of literary biography, linking the work to the life, primarily by inferring the life from the work. But

Ilha do Desterro	Florianópolis	nº 34	p. 013-026	jan./jun. 1998
------------------	---------------	-------	------------	----------------

Walton's information about Magdalene Herbert did not come entirely from her son's poems. Walton had seen John Donne "weep, and preach" a memorial sermon for Mrs. Herbert in 1627, an experience that seems to have made a profound impression on him (Walton 270). Donne's sermon was also in print. As Novarr demonstrates, Walton devotes an "unduly large part" of his *Life of Herbert* to Magdalene Herbert partly because information about her was near at hand, and partly because he was eager to show "the nobility and capability of the entire Herbert family" and thus the suitability of the church as a career for the well-born (Novarr 340). "The material which concerned Herbert's mother was quickly available to him, and in view of the paucity of his information about the remainder of the family, he took advantage of what was accessible" (340). Walton emphasized Herbert's closeness to his mother because Mrs. Herbert had been a friend and patron of Donne, whom Walton admired, and because Walton wished to stress George Herbert's distinguished connections. He might have placed more emphasis on the poet's older brother Edward, Lord Herbert of Cherbury, had he known the details of Lord Herbert's autobiography, but it was not published until 1770, and Walton probably did not see it in manuscript form (Novarr 340).

In addition to Donne's memorial sermon, Walton also seems to have had access to several otherwise unknown letters and poems by Herbert, although he never mentions how he came by them. (Novarr thinks he got them from Herbert's executor) (Arthur Woodnoth 332). This material includes two letters from Herbert to his mother, one of which, according to Walton, accompanied a pair of sonnets the young Herbert sent from Cambridge to "his dear Mother for a New-years gift" (Walton 270). However, F. E. Hutchinson, the editor of Herbert's *Works*, cautions that "In view of the freedom with which Walton altered" and paraphrased some of Donne's letters in the text of the *Life* (1658), we cannot be sure that we have Herbert's exact words in this reported early letter" (578). The same might be said of the sonnets themselves or of the ten letters for which Walton is the only authority (Hutchinson

577). How Walton's goal of portraying a close relationship between the poet and his high-born mother may have influenced his reporting of Herbert's letters or poems no one knows.

If Magdalene Herbert's personal prominence influenced Walton's choice of emphasis, so did her name. Walton begins his life of Herbert not with the poet's childhood or an account of his family, but with the biblical figure of Mary Magdalene. Although Walton explains that he opens his *Life of Herbert* with Mary Magdalene because he wants to preserve Herbert's memory as the gospels preserve hers, he does not say what led him to single her out from the other disciples as an example of preserved memory. The choice reflects not only Walton's interest in spiritual "translation," as Novarr shows, but also the association of the name both with Herbert's mother and with "The Church." Mary Magdalene appears as virtually the only female character in Herbert's English lyrics. (His poem on the Virgin Mary is a two-line commentary on Mary's name as an anagram of "army".) Walton thus found a precedent in Herbert's English poetry for associating the poet with Mary Magdalene, an association no doubt made irresistibly strong by the fact that Mrs. Herbert shared the name. As Novarr mentions, the story of Mary Magdalene and the story of George Herbert have in common "the translation from the worldly to the spiritual life" (314). Introducing Herbert's life with an allusion to Mary Magdalene gives Walton a chance to imply that it was Herbert's destiny to forsake the world for a holy life, and that in some unspecified way that destiny was determined by his mother.

The association of Mary Magdalene and Mrs. Herbert was further reinforced by Donne's sonnet "To the Lady Magdalen Herbert: Of St. Mary Magdalen," which Walton includes in his *Life of Herbert* (269):

Her of your name, whose fair inheritance  
Bethina was, and jointure Magdalo,  
An active faith so highly did advance,

That she once knew more than the Church did know,  
The Resurrection! (1-5)

George Herbert's "Marie Magdalene" makes no such explicit connections between the saint and Magdalene Herbert, yet it does make the essential connection, amplified by Walton and later critics, between the speaker (in this case the "we") of Herbert's poem and Mary Magdalene:

When blessed Marie wip'd her Saviors feet,  
(Whose precepts she had trampled on before)  
And wore them for a jewell on her head,  
    Shewing his steps should be the street  
    Wherein she thenceforth evermore  
With pensive humblenesse would live and tread:  
  
She being stain'd her self, why did she strive  
To make him clean, who could not be defil'd?  
Why kept she not her tears for her own faults,  
    And not his feet? Though we could dive  
    In tears like seas, our sinnes are pil'd  
Deeper then they, in words, and works, and thoughts.  
  
Deare soul, she knew who did vouchsafe and deigne  
To bear her filth; and that her sinnes did dash  
Ev'n God himself: wherefore she was not loth,  
    As she had brought wherewith to stain,  
    So to bring in wherewith to wash:  
And yet in washing one, she washed both.

Combined with all the name's other associations, the correlation between Herbert's poetic speaker and Mary Magdalene became a warrant for

Walton to imagine the relationship between George and Magdalene Herbert. Herbert's mother must have shown him the "street" of pensive humbleness that he eventually would tread, just as Mary Magdalene shows the way to all sinners. Like many of Walton's other inferences and borrowings from Herbert's poems, however, this one remains unsupported by external biographical evidence. That Herbert and his mother must have enjoyed some kind of relationship can hardly be doubted. That it resembled Walton's portrayal is far from certain.

In spite of the circularity and subjectivity of Walton's *Life of Herbert*, widely known at least since Novarr, scholars continue to rely on Walton's impressions of Herbert and his mother. These impressions figure, for example, in Deborah Rubin's recent article "The Mourner in the Flesh: George Herbert's Commemoration of Magdalen Herbert in *Memoriae Matris Sacrum*." In the course of demonstrating the "shared identity" (17) Herbert constructs for himself and his mother in these memorial poems, Rubin speaks of an "excessive interest in the physical" in "*Memoriae Matris Sacrum* 6." This obsession, she says, is both "a natural aspect of the mourning process" and a result of Herbert's "erotic attachment to his mother" (23). As evidence of such an attachment, Rubin cites "Biographical information" which she says implies that Herbert's "relation to his mother was an unusually close one" (27 n. 18). This unspecified biographical information almost surely derives from Walton. Rubin goes on to stress the death of Herbert's father when the poet was about four, "a crucial age in terms of the resolution of oedipal conflicts" (27 n. 18). She also stresses a fact glossed over in Walton's biography—though not in Donne's memorial sermon—Magdalene Herbert's marriage to Sir John Danvers, a man half her age, when George Herbert was fifteen (27 n. 18).

Rubin applies Freudian concepts such as oedipal conflict to an "unusually close" relationship between George and Magdalene Herbert that may well have been invented by Walton and thereby discovers Herbert's "erotic attachment" to his mother. She then uses this supposed erotic attachment to help explain Herbert's rather florid classical poems

in memory of Magdalene Herbert. These poems might be differently explained by other biographical speculations, such as Herbert's desire to advance his personal fortunes by publishing his poems in an important volume featuring a sermon by Dr. John Donne. Walton offers no help here, however, since his purpose as a biographer was to show Herbert's turning away from worldly achievement rather than toward it.

Freudian approaches such as Rubin's profit from the important place Walton's *Life of Herbert* gave to the poet's mother. But what Novarr calls Walton's "unduly large" emphasis on Magdalene Herbert has also affected scholars who show no theoretical predisposition toward family romance. Amy M. Charles, Herbert's modern biographer, devotes a large section at the beginning of her *Life of George Herbert* to Magdalene Herbert. In spite of Charles's familiarity with Novarr's work on Walton and her general skepticism about the particulars of Walton's biography, she often follows him when his ideas strike her as plausible. For example, while admitting that Walton's account of the Herbert household at Oxford contains "inaccuracies," including a generally discounted attribution of Donne's poem "The Autumnall" to this period, Charles thinks "Walton is unlikely to have invented Donne's chance visit to Oxford" (34), and so dates Mrs. Herbert's friendship with Donne from that period. Like Walton, too, Charles stresses Magdalene Herbert's character and the particulars of her life as important influences on George Herbert.

Of course there is nothing improbable about the notion that a poet's mother might have affected his life and work. The point is that there is nothing in Herbert's case to suggest an "unduly large" influence except a tradition originating with Walton and a scarcity of information about other early influences. Like Walton, Charles necessarily uses the evidence at hand, and much of it concerns Mrs. Herbert. While Charles's search for documentation was as thorough and scholarly as Walton's had been haphazard (Novarr 341-43), she shows a similar

determination to put Magdalene Herbert near the center of George Herbert's life.

Walton's emphasis on Herbert's mother helped him explain why Herbert chose the life of a country parson over the life of aristocratic preferment to which he had been born and bred. While Charles borrows this emphasis from Walton, she adds a documentary dimension that anchors her admiration for Mrs. Herbert in the details of daily life. In particular, she makes use of Mrs. Herbert's *Kitchin Booke*, a household account book kept by Magdalene Herbert's steward, John Gorse, and signed monthly by Mrs. Herbert. Although this volume had been known at least since J. J. Daniell mentioned it in his *Life of George Herbert of Bemerton* in 1893, Daniell had never seen the book, and no scholar had given it any attention until Charles examined it in the collection of the Earl of Powis and published an article about it in 1974. Through her analysis of the *Kitchen Booke*, Charles was able to confirm Walton's impression that Magdalene Herbert was "memorable for [her] hospitality," although Walton assigns this attribute to Mrs. Herbert's entire family, the Newports, rather than to Mrs. Herbert alone (Walton 262). In London in 1601, Mrs. Herbert maintained a household of 26—including her ten children, the wife of the eldest, a nephew, and 14 servants—and sat down with additional guests at almost every meal (Charles, *Life* 41).

From Charles's account of the *Kitchin Booke*, Magdalene Herbert appears to have been, as Walton often calls her, a "prudent mother" and a good housekeeper. As Charles observes, she showed special excellence in choosing the meticulous record-keeper John Gorse as her steward ("Kitchin Booke" 173). Gorse's accounts give a feeling of the everyday life of the Herbert children, their meals, their studies, their recreations. But Gorse evidently makes few entries that single out George Herbert. There is nothing in the *Kitchin Booke*, for example, that would either confirm or deny Walton's speculations about the "sweet content under the eye and care of his prudent Mother" in which George Herbert passed his childhood (264). Even reinforced by documentary

research, the assumption that a study of Magdalene Herbert's behavior will lead to an understanding of her son's mental or creative life remains little more than a legacy from Walton. It is an assumption supported by the common-sense intuition that individuals are shaped by the texture of their daily lives, but unconfirmed in Herbert's case by any concrete details.

Just as we lack independent biographical information about many other areas of Herbert's life—his marriage, for example, or the “court hopes” Walton attributes to him—we lack details about the poet's relationship to his mother. In the absence of such external evidence, modern critics have often followed Walton in reading Herbert's poems as nonfiction. This is especially true of the Latin and Greek memorial poems in *Memoriae Matris Sacrum*, which Walton did not or perhaps could not read. Charles, for instance, accepts as “probable” Herbert's poetic assertion that his mother served as his first penmanship teacher (*Life* 44): “you taught me how to write, / That skill owes you praise, that skill, unloosed, / Floods the paper, having gathered labor's / Finest fruit in honoring a mother” (McCloskey and Murphy, “*Memoriae Matris Sacrum* 2”). William Kerrigan, demonstrating how authority begets authority, remarks that Herbert's mother “taught him calligraphy—a *fact confirmed by his biographer* who tells us that all of the Herbert children wrote the hand of Magdalene (Charles, p. 44)” (emphasis added). Charles's biographical inference from a poem by Herbert thus becomes for Kerrigan the independent confirmation of a “fact” asserted in the poem.

But can the declaration in a poem that the poet's mother taught him to write really be taken as evidence that she personally, and not a tutor, helped him form his first letters? Rubin, who insists that *Memoriae Matris Sacrum* offers no biographical information about Magdalene Herbert herself, nevertheless discovers in the poems psychological “projections” of George Herbert onto the silenced person of his mother (14). Accordingly, Rubin takes “you taught me how to write” not as a literal description of Herbert's upbringing but as an association of his

identity as a scholar and a poet with hers: "George claims an indebtedness that transcends a child's to a conscientious parent or teacher: he and Magdalen are bound physically and psychologically by aspects of a shared identity" (17). In a similarly psychological vein, E. Pearlman says that Herbert's Latin and Greek memorial poems allow "an opening for psychological scrutiny at a happy intersection of art and autobiography" (90). From his reading of the memorial sequence, Pearlman feels justified in asserting that "Herbert's relationship to his mother was extraordinary and perfervid" (91), and that the poet's "sense of the sacred cannot be divorced from his relationship with his mother, for both Lady Danvers and his God are celebrated in similar terms and in similar language" (97). This perceived confluence of the poetic and the autobiographical leads Pearlman to re-read one of Herbert's best-known English lyrics, "Love" (III), in light of "the radical confusion in Herbert's mind between things maternal and things divine" (111).

Heather Asals interprets the links among Magdalene Herbert, John Donne, George Herbert and the Anglican Church in ways that resemble the associative methods of Izaak Walton more than those of psychoanalysis. Like Walton, Asals cites Donne's memorial sermon of 1627 as evidence of Mrs. Herbert's character. Donne describes Magdalene Herbert's devotion to the Anglican "middle way" in terms of her dress—"never *sumptuous*, never *sordid*", a trope that resembles George Herbert's own description of his mother's dress in *Memoriae Matris Sacrum*: "after doing up her hair / In a simple style, the way that decent women do, / And putting round the front a tiny ribbon, / She put her dewy soul in care / Of holy business" (*Memoriae Matris Sacrum* 2). Asals then associates these comments on Magdalene Herbert's moderation in dress with George Herbert's English poem, "The British Church" and finally with Herbert's poem about Mary Magdalene. "Marie Magdalene," according to Asals, merges Magdalene Herbert and Mother Church in the emblem of the biblical Magdalene, the same emblem with which Walton had begun his *Life of Herbert*. Whereas Walton stresses Mary Magdalene as the type of

the redeemed sinner, however, Asals emphasizes Mary Magdalene in her role as apostle to the apostles. Mary Magdalene showed the Resurrection to the other disciples just as Magdalene Herbert showed her son George how to write. "Here is the type of Anglicanism, bridging the extremes of 'both' in 'one' and here is an emblem of Herbert's poetic language in 'The Church' (Asals 98).

Although Asals' analysis draws some of its authority from post-structuralist emphasis on associative wordplay, it is still grounded in biographical and textual assumptions originating with Walton. Donne's sermon and Herbert's *Memoriae Matris Sacrum* are taken as reliable biographical evidence about Magdalene Herbert. This evidence is then used to illuminate Herbert's English poems, such as "The British Church," whose opening lines make explicit the link between Church, mother and language:

I joy, deare Mother, when I view  
 Thy perfect lineaments and hue  
                   Both sweet and bright.  
 Beautie in thee takes up her place,  
 And dates her letters from thy face,  
                   When she doth write.

While Walton found Herbert identifying with "Marie Magdalene" as a weeping penitent, Asals sees him identifying with her as first apostle and emblem of the British Church. Unlike psychological critics, neither Walton nor Asals appears to find "erotic attachment" in the fact that Herbert's poem links his identity (and that of his readers) to a female saint, the namesake of the poet's own mother. Walton implies, however, what Asals explicitly asserts: that "Magdalene Herbert presents to the literary critic a key to the ontology of Herbert's poetry itself, to the locus and nature of the 'being' of a Herbert poem" (95), especially in "Marie Magdalene":

Deare soul, she knew who did vouchsafe and deigne  
To bear her filth; and that her sinnes did dash  
Ev'n God himself: wherefore she was not loth,  
    As she had brought wherewith to stain,  
    So to bring in wherewith to washz  
And yet in washing one, she washed both.           (13-18)

The "one/both" equation at the end of this poem is complex. It may represent the shared identities of Jesus and Mary Magdalene, of the Magdalene and the poet (and the reader), or even, although with considerable strain, of the Anglican Church and the extremes of Calvinist Protestantism and Roman Catholicism, where the moderation of the English "middle way" washes away the extremes (Asals 98). But can this "one/both," without the help of bogus biographical "facts" and emphases, really stand for the "shared identity" of George and Magdalene Herbert? Does the legitimate biographical information give us reason to believe that George Herbert shared his sense of self with his mother more than anyone else does?

We know this much: George Herbert wrote Greek and Latin memorial poems in memory of his mother as well as a sequence of English poems now called *The Temple*. Some readers (Walton, Rubin, Pearlman, Asals) have found in both the memorial sequence and the English poems a merging of theology and autobiography. We know that Magdalene Herbert was widowed when George was four years old and that Freudian theory holds that boys of four have arrived at "a crucial age in terms of the resolution of oedipal conflicts" (Rubin 27). Mrs. Herbert remained a widow for 12 years while George was growing up and then married a man young enough to be her son. At some time in his adult life, George Herbert wrote an English poem about Mary Magdalene, after whom his mother had been named. We also know that even Herbert's most meticulously scholarly biographer, Amy

Charles, could not resist imitating Walton's emphasis on Mrs. Herbert's (probable) strong influence on her son as priest and poet.

What we know is not enough to justify the common assumption that George Herbert was unusually influenced by or attached to his mother. Nor does such speculation about the mother-son bond really illuminate Herbert's "Marie Magdalene." The tension in the poem between repentance and instruction, between Mary Magdalene as reformed sinner and Mary Magdalene as *apostola apostolourm* inheres in the paradoxical tradition of the Magdalene herself. Her biblical image includes Luke's story that Jesus cured her of "seven devils" (Chapter 8) and John's account of her as one of the women who rose early on Easter to anoint the body of Jesus (Chapter 20). In John, she is also the first to whom the risen Christ appears (20). Tradition associates her with the unnamed sinner, usually assumed to be a prostitute, who washed Jesus' feet in the house of Simon (Luke 7), and with Mary of Bethany, who sat at Jesus' feet while her sister Martha worked (Luke 10). (For a comprehensive treatment of Mary Magdalene's traditional image(s), see Haskins.) The Magdalene thus stands both for the sinful soul healed by Christ and the favored disciple who shows the way to others. Herbert's Marie Magdalene had "trampled" on Jesus' "precepts" (her seven devils were often associated with the seven deadly sins), but she later wiped his feet and "wore them for a jewell on her head." She thus inverted the relationship between her feet and his head and signified her commitment to "pensive humblenesse." Herbert's poem then moves to the paradox of Mary's washing him "who could not be defil'd" and explains it through Christ's voluntary assumption of human sin and Mary's early recognition of the sacrifice: "she knew who did vouchsafe and deigne / To bear her filth." Mary Magdalene becomes both the washed and the washer, the anointed and the anointer, whose apparently contradictory images are resolved in her own tears: "And yet in washing one, she washed both."

Associating with Magdalene Herbert all the elements of Mary Magdalene's complex image—whore and heroine, sinner and

contemplative, follower and leader—was more than Donne was willing to do. In his sonnet to Mrs. Herbert, as quoted by Walton (269), he wittily alludes to controversies among theologians over whether all these biblical Marys were really the same person: “so much good there is / Delivered of her, that some Fathers be / Loth to believe one woman could do this” (5-7), and advises Magdalene Herbert to “Take so much of th’example, as of the name; / The latter half” (11-12). George Herbert goes further than Donne in making the paradoxical Magdalene serve as an emblem of the human soul, but if he meant to connect her attributes to the biographical person of Mrs. Herbert, that intention does not appear in “Marie Magdalene”.

The picture of George Herbert and his mother that has evolved over the last three centuries owes much to tradition and little to evidence. One might well want to know why this tradition has seemed plausible or why in various periods critics of Herbert’s work have found it useful. But the “unusually close,” “extraordinary and perfervid” mother-son relationship of tradition remains a critical fable rather than a biographical fact. Perhaps it is the fate of literary biography always to overreach its evidence in its eagerness to understand exactly how the life produced the work. Such overreaching, however, puts an obstacle between the reader and the work, and scholars have an obligation to avoid it when they can.

### Works cited

Asals, Heather A. R. *Equivocal Predication: George Herbert’s Way to God*. Toronto: U of Toronto Press, 1981.

Charles, Amy M. *A Life of George Herbert*. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1977.

— “Mrs. Herbert’s Kitchin Booke.” *ELR* 4 (1974): 164-73.

Donne, John. *A Sermon of Commemoration of the Lady Danvers. By John Donne. Together with Other Commemorations of Her; by her Sonne G. Herbert*. London: 1627.

- Haskins, Susan. *Mary Magdalen: Myth and Metaphor*. New York: Harper, 1993.
- Hutchinson, F. E., ed. *The Works of George Herbert*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1941.
- Kerrigan, William. "Ritual Man: On the Outside of Herbert's Poetry." *Psychiatry* 48 (1985): 68-82.
- McCloskey, Mark and Paul R. Murphy, trans. *The Latin Poetry of George Herbert*. Athens, Ohio: Ohio UP, 1965.
- Novarr, David. *The Making of Walton's "Lives."* Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1958.
- Pearlman, E. "George Herbert's God." *ELR* 13 (1983): 88-112.
- Rubin, Deborah. "The Mourner in the Flesh: George Herbert's Commemoration of Magdalen Herbert in *Memoriae Matris Sacrum*." In Thais E. Morgan, ed. *Men Writing the Feminine: Literature, Theory, and the Question of Genders*. Albany, State U of New York P, 1994.
- Walton, Izaak. *The Lives of Dr. John Donne, Sir Henry Wotton, Mr. Richard Hooker, Mr. George Herbert, and Dr. Robert Sanderson*. Ed. A. H. Bullen. London: George Bell, 1903.