

Ryan Netzley
Professor of English
Southern Illinois University, Carbondale
rnetzley@siu.edu

George Herbert in Paris: Fifth Triennial Conference of the George Herbert Society
abstract

Mine Then Thine: Exchange, Ownership, and Free Salvation in *The Temple*

Do humans trade with God? Modern criticism frequently uses the concept of exchange to describe economic, amatory, social, rhetorical, and even intellectual relationships. This paper explores the limitations of that concept in Herbert's *The Temple*. It also asks whether we know what we're talking about when we talk about the act of exchange. What is it? When does it happen? And how do we know when it's finished?

I contend that *The Temple* obsesses over the moment and concept of possession so as to drive readers away not just from sinful, prideful attachments, but so as to unseat the ubiquity of exchange as a model for relation. Herbert's verse shows that the metaphor of trading products is a decidedly inefficient, and even unethical, means of figuring activity, which is what a real relationship with divinity would be. The concept of ownership is undoubtedly central to Herbert's understanding of devotion: see, for example, "all things were more ours by being his" from "The Holdfast," or "make no Thine and Mine" from "Clasping of Hands." I argue, though, that as *The Temple* progresses, it exhibits a greater suspicion of the value of exchange, especially exchange with the divine. Trade, after all, requires a relation built on trust instead of a relation built on love. When the relations that we have with others circle around a drama of sincerity and fair dealing, we have essentially adopted the dynamic of a market or credit exchange as the paradigm for all action. And although trust and love might appear intuitively connected,

Herbert's verse shows that there is something fundamentally incongruous about the association.

This paper argues, ultimately, that Herbert's suspicion of the concept of exchange serves as a useful tool for rethinking that concept's ubiquity in our own era of neoliberal, post-national capitalism.