

LEAH WHITTINGTON. *Renaissance Suppliants: Poetry, Antiquity, Reconciliation*. Pp. xviii239. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016. Hardback, £55.

This splendidly provocative book offers the biography of a topos. It treats supplication, a surprisingly ubiquitous master-genre in early modern literature, as a site of both reciprocity and instability—a fragile discourse that offers a medium for reconciliation between unequal partners but just as easily threatens to open up new disparities between its participants. Whittington traces the genesis and evolution of supplication as both a social practice and literary event from Graeco-Roman antiquity to Milton. *Renaissance Suppliants* demonstrates, through close readings of Petrarch, Shakespeare, and Milton, how this literary topos (which transcends the status of mere literary topos) is transformed in its several iterations: supplicatory discourse in Renaissance literature is shaped by the legacy of past instantiations but is sufficiently malleable to engender unexpected recalibrations and twists.

In Whittington's conception, supplication represents a set piece, both paradigmatic and, in its uses and reuses, versatile. It negotiates asymmetry; it stages humiliation and abjection; and it reroutes the expected vectors of sympathy in unfamiliar directions. In each of its principal chapters, this study contextualizes the idea of supplication within illuminating cultural, political, and religious frameworks, and locates this presiding trope within discrete literary genres. Whittington is, avowedly, most interested in analysing deviations and abrogations from the Platonic paradigm of supplication: having carefully established the grammar of supplicatory discourse in the opening chapters, Whittington then dwells on the aesthetic and political implications that arise from the manipulation of that underlying grammar by three major writers: Petrarch, in his erotic poetry, in which supplicatory scenarios figure abjection and loss; Shakespeare's dramas, primarily *Richard II* and *Coriolanus*, which detail the political and emotional costs borne by those who are supplicated; and Milton's epic, whose vertical image systems, invested with Homeric subtexts and responding to seventeenth-century debates about religious kneeling, rethink hierarchy and foster, unexpectedly, the conditions for reconciliation. As the apotheosis of the supplicatory tradition, *Paradise Lost* finally makes irrelevant certain hierarchical distinctions through the paradox of God's promise, in Book III, that 'humiliation shall exalt'.

These three canonical authors epitomize the poetic and dramatic permutations afforded by the rhetoric and iconography of supplication. Petrarch's unstable self and conflicted interiority—commonplaces in the critical tradition—is here cleverly related not just to his well-established engagements with antiquity but also, and more surprisingly, to supplicatory discourse and its machinery of suspense and uncertainty, evident even in the 'in morte' section of the *Rime Sparse*. Located against a Dantean poetry of praise, Petrarch is credited with reintroducing a supplicatory poetics and interweaving multiple discourses of supplication and desire in unusual collocations. With similar attentiveness to literary tradition, the chapter on Shakespeare's drama considers *Richard II* and *Coriolanus* in the light of the iconographic heritage of early Tudor theatre and in the context of the paradigms of estrangement and forgiveness found in Shakespeare's late romances—a resolution denied the characters in *Coriolanus*, whose reconciliations are obstructed by the conciliatory transactions themselves. Supplicatory rituals here work as instruments not only of resistance and opposition but also of mutual hurt for both parties, leading to a failure of full reconciliation or 'rapprochement'. And finally, in a comparable inversion of supplicatory expectations, the final chapter offsets Milton's anti-monarchical dismantling of supplicatory, deferential language against his recuperation of supplicatory forms in *Paradise Lost* which redefines humiliation as a dignified, transformative gesture distinct from self-lowering subjection. Kneeling is salvaged from its embedment in royalist politics and liturgical ceremony, and Satan's inadequate understanding of supplication is counterpointed with Adam and Eve's recognition of the possibilities for realigning relative status, enabling reconciliation and mutuality in post-lapsarian Eden, and dispensing with some of the hierarchical structures that Satan's circular logic merely reinscribes.

Renaissance Suppliants is refreshing in not only its insistently (and polemically) cross-generic methodology but also its marriage of historicist and formalist approaches. It syncretizes and builds on a wealth of discrete but overlapping scholarship—from ambitious cross-period, transcultural studies (Thomas Greene) to more recent, more localized research on the passions, compassion, and affective structures in early modern literature (Gail Kern Paster); on petitioning in Stuart politics (Annabel Paterson); the language of mercy and penitence in Tudor religious practice (K. J. Kesselring); and the scripts of female entreaty (Lynne Magnusson and Alison Thorne). Whittington's study is at once more far-reaching and more particular: it encompasses macrocosmic, transhistorical considerations by charting the *longue durée* of supplication, and its variant uses in either reasserting a hierarchical status quo or inaugurating change; and, through a kind of fractal logic, it identifies manifestations of supplicatory

discourse at a series of increasingly minute, microscopic levels. It spans antique and early modern rhetorical traditions (from Aristotle's discussions of pity onwards) but also proffers sensitive close readings in its unrelenting attentiveness to the aesthetics of supplication as a spectacle of wonder. Whittington has a particular skill for unpacking recurrent image systems (for instance, metaphors of transaction) and anatomizing the etymologies of recurrent keywords: she reconstructs the cognate relationship between words for 'knees' and 'generation'; addresses the revealingly spatialized etymologies of Greek and Latin verbs of supplication; and uncovers local nuance on a microcosmic scale, as in describing the Son's voluntary humiliation in *Paradise Lost* as an act of 'etymologically taking on the *humus* from which Adam was fashioned' (p. 187).

One of the book's defining strengths is its diachronic purview. From its first chapter, establishing the paradox of the 'suppliant's powerful powerlessness' (p. 18), this study maps the transhistorical evolution of an idea, from the foundational, iconographic importance of supplicatory tableaux in Vergil's *Aeneid* (branded an archive of supplicatory scenarios available for later writers to mine, borrow, and invert) to the post-Renaissance afterlife of supplication tantalizingly glimpsed in the crisp Epilogue which runs the gamut from eighteenth-century sentimental novels to Picasso's 1937 *The Suppliant* and the 2008 financial crisis. As such, it remedies the cultural rupture and chronological alienation that early modern humanism anxiously opened up. And by insistently reminding her readers of the cultural subtext afforded by classical antiquity to Renaissance writers, Whittington gratifyingly inflects the idea of supplication to the level of literary technique and cultural reception itself. Supplication becomes more than just a pose, rhetorical strategy, or spatial discourse that, even in its textual representations, continually 'strains towards embodiment' (p. 19). It becomes a device enabling Renaissance writers to assimilate and transform the cultural inheritance of antiquity, and to play variations on its phenomenological applications in, for instance, the *Aeneid*, whose narrator, pointedly sympathetic to the narrative's suppliants, resembles a suppliant in turn by constraining readers (ancient and modern) into positions of conflicted sympathy. Given the pervasiveness of the topos, illustrated by Whittington in the works of three of the most canonical writers, future scholars will not struggle to find supplicatory discourse elsewhere in the period—in writers' petitions to readers in paratextual material, or in playwrights' appeals in epilogues. This is a wonderful study of a mode and its possibilities, failures, paradoxes, and evolutions. It is full of surprises and revisionary turns, demonstrating how supplication, for Renaissance writers, is neither a moribund legacy nor part of a painting-by-numbers formula, but the site of endless poetic energies and unexpected effects.

Chris Stamatakis
University College London
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