Liturgical Practice and Poetic Dissent in Antebellum America

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The old quarrel. Long after Virginia and Massachusetts ceased hostilities, whether in the decades-long political tête-à-tête between Jefferson and Adams, the literary skirmishes of Poe and Emerson, or the shots exchanged on the battlefields of the Civil War, their dialectic has persisted. But now the field has been left to the historians and critics. There’s little of the martial in these two studies, but they are reminiscent of the profound religious and political differences—not to mention the temperamental divide—between these two colonies and their antebellum citizens. Of course, given that Lauren Winner’s study of elite Anglicans focuses nearly entirely on the eighteenth century, and Victoria Morgan situates her analysis of Emily Dickinson largely in the nineteenth century, we discern in these books a gulf between patrician colonial values and romantic Transcendentalist ones. However, more striking are the fundamental differences in how each author approaches historical analysis and literary criticism. If Winner’s study finds its substance and vitality in the new historicist materiality of her subject (baptismal fonts, recipes, mourning clothes, etc.), Morgan’s undertaking is more abstract and speculative. Her reading of Dickinson is determinedly theoretical but still undergirded by an admirable devotion to close reading. Even so, both books make it new. Winner’s newness springs from her adept appreciation for the formative power of “practices.” With keen attention to what theorist Etienne Wenger and others have recently termed “com-
munities of practice." A Cheerful and Comfortable Faith explores the beliefs of the Virginia gentry not so much by focusing on what they believed but rather how they practiced Anglican piety in their households. Likewise, Morgan is innovative because this study is perhaps the first to take seriously Dickinson’s debt not only to Isaac Watts but also to the hymn writing that he inspired in nineteenth-century New England. Informed by an undaunted (if sometimes puzzling) alloy of Transcendentalism and contemporary feminist theology, her book is an astute exploration of Dickinson’s inventive appropriation of the tone and tropes of Dissent-minded hymnody.

Winner’s book turns on the question of liturgical practice—its materiality and embodiment, as well as the spaces in which it is physically realized. As her title indicates, Winner takes for granted a phenomenology of Anglican religious practice that might at first appear counterintuitive. Hers is a book of households and domestic life because Anglicanism in her account is instantiated chiefly “inside the Great House” (15). In these planters’ homes, asserts Winner, “we see the regular workings out—the ‘lived religion’—of Virginia Anglicanism’s persistent laicism. In the household, laypeople constructed and maintained religious practice, and they exercised religious authority. Indeed, for many men and women, the household was the site of more intensive or more sustained religious engagement than the nearest chapel of ease” (15). Drawing on a wide variety of sources from southern colonial religious history, Winner structures her study around the materiality of Anglican practice from birth and baptism to death and mourning, and thus from silver bowls and satin baptismal gowns to black dresses and remembrance rings. Hence this book is anchored in the stuff of Anglican laicism. However, it is also set firmly against a backdrop of eighteenth-century Virginian social life, including the inescapable presence of enslaved African Americans, some of them Anglican Christians themselves.

Given such a context, it is no surprise that one of the richest and most fascinating focal points of Winner’s study is the question of authority: its source and sustainability in an American slaveholding colony loyal to the Church of England, certainly, but often only from a distance and mostly on its own terms. Winner explicates many facets of this theme, but two are most surprising. The first has to do with a decided tension between the gentry’s households and the local parish church. It seems that for eighteenth-century Anglicans, baptismal water seldom achieved the thickness of patrilineal blood. When it came to

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1 See Etienne Wenger’s Communities of Practice, in which he persuasively elucidates the formative power of practices. Also relevant here for Winner’s discussion of specifically Christian liturgical practices is Dorothy Bass and Craig Dykstra, “Times of Yearning, Practices of Faith” in Practicing Our Faith.