

**Christ's blood or Mary's milk? 'Clarus Bonarscius',  
Baroque Piety and English Protestant Outrage**

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Is Christ's blood or milk from the Virgin Mary's breasts of greater succour to mankind?<sup>1</sup> For a seventeenth-century reader this question could be the height of Catholic piety or the nadir of papist blasphemy. It was posed in a Latin poem by 'Clarus Bonarscius', the anagrammatic pseudonym of the Jesuit Carolus Scribani, which became well known in early seventeenth-century England when it inspired a polemical exchange. The main Protestant contributor to this was the cleric, scholar and controversialist William Crashaw, for whom the poem epitomized all the mistaken priorities of popish devotion; *The Jesuites Gospel* (1st ed. 1610) is an extended diatribe against it. In response the Jesuit John Floyd, leaping to the defence of his Order, accused Crashaw of misreading the poem through unscholarliness and literary naïveté. Hence, a debate that began in denominational difference mutated into one about baroque style, in which techniques of polemical animadversion, applied to religious verse, foreshadowed twentieth-century notions of close reading.

*Bonarscius' pious dilemma*

The Virgin Mary's role in facilitating Christ's salvation of mankind was much celebrated in medieval Christian piety.<sup>2</sup> Images of her suckling Christ were familiar, called variously the Nursing Madonna, *virgo lactans* or 'Madonna del latte'. As Marina Warner has written, 'the milk of the mother of God became ... highly charged with the symbolism of life, for the life of life's own source depended upon it' (1976: 194). Given that in contemporary medicine milk was thought to be processed menstrual blood, this maternal role could also be seen as prefiguring Christ's nourishment of mankind by blood shed on the Cross.<sup>3</sup> Some pre-

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<sup>2</sup> Rubin 2009; Johnson and Rintoul 2019; Sperling 2021a.

<sup>3</sup> Cabré / Salmón 2020; Weaver 2021.

Reformation images of nursing Madonnas continued to be venerated into the early modern era and beyond: among them the Virgin of Halle, which inspired Bonarscius' poem and continues to attract pilgrims to this day (fig. 1).<sup>4</sup>



Figure 1: The Virgin of Halle, Belgium (Wikimedia)

The Counter-Reformation era saw an urge to curb artists' pious excess in cases where, as here, an element of nudity was intrinsic to the subject.<sup>5</sup> Yet this was in the context of affirmation, where images of the Virgin Mary presented a contrast to the relatively masculine devotional choices offered by Protestantism. For Protestants, turning attention away from Mary and other saints – many of them female – ensured a more undeviating gaze on Christ; relatedly, they tended to de-emphasize the Christ-child in favour of the adult Christ, weaned from his mother's breast and untethered from her apron strings. In the early days of the Reformation, Marian piety was often simply reconceived as idolatrous; yet Martin Luther himself was fairly well-disposed

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<sup>4</sup> A typical contemporary representation of this statue can be found on the title page of Justus Lipsius' *Diva virgo Hallensis* (Antwerp 1605). Bonarscius' poem intervenes in a controversy sparked by Lipsius' defence of Marian miracle, on which see Theo Hermans, 'Miracles in Translation: Lipsius, Our Lady of Halle and Two Dutch Translations', *Renaissance Studies*, 29:1: 'Translation and Print Culture in Early Modern Europe' (2015), 125–42; and Maarten Delbeke, Lise Constant, Lobke Geurs and Annelies Staessen, 'The Architecture of Miracle-Working Statues in the Southern Netherlands', *Revue de l'Histoire des Religions*, 232:5 (2015), 211–56. For a contemporary English-language endorsement of Marian veneration on the Continent, see Philippe Numan, trans. Robert Chambers, *Miracles lately wrought by the intercession of the glorious Virgin Marie, at Mont-aigu, nere unto Siché, in Brabant* (Antwerp 1606).

<sup>5</sup> Pérez-Gil 2017: 4–5; see also Sperling 2021b; Hall / Cooper 2013.

to Mary, and as Protestant theology evolved and diversified, so did attitudes towards her.<sup>6</sup> Hence, the awareness that Jesus would never have been born if Mary had refused God's call, and never grown up to be the saviour of mankind if he had not been nurtured by Mary at her breast, was not exclusive to Catholics after the Reformation. Nevertheless, anxieties about female agency remained common in this context. The idea that Jesus, whom all humankind needed to take as their leader and exemplar, could ever have been under the command of his mother was basic to the idea of his incarnation, so could hardly be dismissed altogether – yet it became deeply troubling.

The Gospels, unquestionably, focus on the adult Jesus and give few column inches to Mary. Christian denominations still diverge sharply on how far inferences drawn from the Bible and endorsed by the church should fill in the gaps. Catholics, for instance, still venerate Mary above any other saint, while evangelical Protestants pay her relatively little attention.<sup>7</sup> In the Reformation era as now, this gap epitomizes varying attitudes to scriptural authority: Mary polarizes the differences between those who appeal to the Bible as the sole source of Christian truth, a widely held Protestant position, and those who, like Catholics, see the Bible and church tradition as complementary.<sup>8</sup> Thus, the antithesis between Christ's blood and Mary's milk poses, in miniature, the difference between what is explicit in scripture and what worshipping communities have traditionally inferred from scripture. By the same token, there was much less of a gap between these two devotional foci for those who saw scripture and tradition as comparably authoritative. For such devotees, questions about the relative efficacy of Christ's blood and Mary's milk were genuinely meaningful. But unless one held both blood and milk in high regard, there could be no debate, and for most Protestants in Bonarscius' era, the superiority of Christ's blood would have been obvious.

For literary Catholics, and for those of their Protestant counterparts who were well-disposed towards Marian veneration, the competing claims of Christ's blood and Mary's milk would have had stylistic implications. The link between the term *baroco* and ingenious argument originating in Aristotelian syllogism is recalled in the successive displays of conscious artfulness which give shape to Bonarscius' poem. Describing such stratagems in Richard Crashaw's work, Robert Hudson Vincent has identified an 'intricate display of figural variation that amplifies the sense of *copia*' – and, in a religious context, prolongs the devotional

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<sup>6</sup> MacCulloch 2016: ch. 3; Grindlay 2018.

<sup>7</sup> Beattie 2007; Boss 2007; Schmitz 2018.

<sup>8</sup> Tavard 1959 / 1978; Shell 2007: conclusion.

experience.<sup>9</sup> Moreover, the comparison between blood and milk offered tempting opportunities for mounting a debate *in utramque partem* and exploiting the pleasing effects of parallelism. Bonarscius' poem sets up a dynamic oscillation between the two bodily fluids, causing the speaker of the poem to be caught up in an ecstasy of deferred decision; if his pious dilemma were represented in stone, it would feature the exaggerated *contrapposto* so typical of statues at this date.<sup>10</sup> Indeed, the opening recalls such a statue, showing the speaker quite literally at a standstill:

*Haereo lac inter meditans, interq[ue] cruorem:  
inter delicias uberis, et lateris.  
Et dico, (si forte oculos super Ubera tendo)  
Diva Parens mammae gaudia posco tuae.  
Sed dico, (si deinde oculos in vulnera verto)  
O Jesu, lateris gaudia malo tui.  
Rem scio. Prensabo, si fas erit, Ubera dextra  
laeva prensabo Vulnera, si dabitur.<sup>11</sup>*

But the speaker's eyes continue to move, first to the Virgin Mary's breasts, then to the wound in Christ's side; and the verse keeps pace, allocating an equal amount of time to each and maintaining a dynamic equilibrium between lines and sense-units. In William Crashaw's relatively free translation, a comparable balance is maintained. Given that he finds the comparison of milk and blood utterly abhorrent, he has every reason to play it up in his polemic, and the poem's internal structures become key to his agenda.

My thoughts are at a stand, of Milke and Bloud,  
(Delights of brest & side) which yeelds most good.  
And say when on the teates mine eyes I caste:  
O Lady, of thy brest I begge a taste.

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<sup>9</sup> Vincent 2019: 251.

<sup>10</sup> Chilvers 2015; Rougé 2006, under *contrapposto*.

<sup>11</sup> *Jesuites Gospel*, 6. Bonarscius' original can be found at 356–8 of the second edition of *Amphitheatrum honoris* (1606), from which Crashaw takes his text (see *The Jesuites Gospel* [1610 ed.], 6), almost certainly his own copy (see n. **XX**). Here and elsewhere, quotations are taken from the full text of both Latin and English poems given in parallel at 6–11 of Crashaw's work. Excerpts given during Crashaw's later analysis sometimes include significant variants: this passage is discussed in detail at 37–40, and in the version of this passage given at 38 [printed as 28], *super Ubera* is given as *ad Ubera*, *in vulnera* as *ad Vulnera*, and *malo tui* as *malo tuae*.

But if mine eyes upon the wounds do glide,  
then (Jesu) I had rather sucke thy side.  
Longe have I mused, now know I where to rest  
for with my right hand I will graspe the brest,  
(If so I may præsume) as for the wounds:  
with lefte ile catch them: thus my zeale abounds ... (7)<sup>12</sup>

### *Crashaw's and Floyd's polemical agendas*

William Crashaw took to heart the injunction to know one's enemy. Preacher to the Middle and Inner Temples in the early seventeenth century and one of the most scholarly controversialists of his age, he amassed one of the period's best libraries, much of which survives to this day in St John's College, Cambridge.<sup>13</sup> It includes a number of Catholic books acquired for the purposes of refutation, among them an edition of *Amphitheatrum honoris* (1st ed. 1605), in which Bonarscius' poem was first published.<sup>14</sup> A book celebrating the Jesuit order, this had an especially direct relevance to the religious situation in England, featuring panegyrics to Jesuit martyrs including Edmund Campion and Robert Southwell, and a tribute to Jesuits in English

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<sup>12</sup> Lines 3–6 of this passage are differently translated in the main body of Crashaw's argument: 'And say aloud when I the *Teates* do see, | O Goddess mother, lend thy *Brests* to mee! | But thus I beg, when on thy *wounds* I thinke | O Jesu give me from thy *side* to drinke' (38 [printed as 28]) – probably, in part, to enhance his polemical point by rendering *Diva Parens* as 'Goddesse mother'.

In another satirical attack on Bonarscius, this indecision is represented by means of three slogans angled across the page, 'HINC SANGUINE PASCOR' ['on this side I am fed with blood'], 'HINC UBERE LACTOR' ['on this side I am suckled (punning on 'I am duped') with the breast'] and 'QUO ME VERTAM NESCIIO' ['I do not know where I might turn myself'], with the author commenting *Tres illi tituli hoc Triangulum efficiunt*, 'Those three titles make this triangle': supplement appended to Petrus de Wangen, *Paraleipomena ad Amphitheatrum honoris Jesuitarum* (Leiden 1611), C6a (copy consulted: British Library 860.b.15).

The phrase *Quo me vertam nescio* can be found in two of Cicero's speeches, 'Pro Cluentio' ('In Defence of Cluentius'), section 4, pp.224-5 (Cicero 1927), and 'Pro Ligario' ('In Defence of Ligarius'), section 1, pp.458-9 (Cicero 1953), and was quoted by Quintilian in *Institutio rhetorica* ('The Orator's Education'), Book 9:4, section 75, pp.200-3 (Quintilianus, 2001). The emblemist Gabriel Rollenhagen applied it to the choice of Hercules (Rollenhagen [1611?], image 14; copy consulted, British Library 636.g.29); his plate was re-used by George Wither in his 1635 publication *A Collection of Emblemes* (Wither 1968), at image 22.

<sup>13</sup> Wallis 1956; St John's Library website.

<sup>14</sup> See n. XX. St John's holds the 1606 edition: Dd.4.8. Crashaw's annotation to this volume is quoted below by permission of the Master and Fellows of St John's College, Cambridge.

jails: a reason why, in the same year that *The Jesuites Gospel* was published, John Donne – by then, a Protestant convert for over a decade – condemned Bonarscius as celebrating treason.<sup>15</sup> Crashaw’s own opinion of *Amphitheatrum honoris* is epitomized by an annotation on the front free endpaper of his own copy – ‘Rayling Jesuit’ –, and his analysis of the poem demonstrates in detail how Bonarscius’ literary expertise only worsens his theological crimes.

One example of this stratagem comes in his discussion of the lines *Suffocare queo sanguine, lacte queo, ... Detergere queo lacte, cruore queo* (8). In context, these describe how a variety of sinful impulses can be overcome: ‘I am able to choke them with blood and milk, / I am able to clear them away with milk and blood.’<sup>16</sup> Crashaw paraphrases them as follows: ‘If *Lust* burne, *Anger* boyle, *Envy* fret, *Vaineglorie* swell, I can helpe it with *blood*, so can I with *milke*: I can helpe it with *milke*,<sup>17</sup> so can I with *bloud*: there can be no greater equality made betwixt any two things in the worlde, then heere they make betwixt this *Bloud* and *Milke*’ (56). His objection is to the word-order, with its implication that *sanguine*, *lacte* and *lacte, cruore* acknowledge no difference in importance between the mother’s milk and the son’s blood, pre-empting the excuse that this may result from technical ineptitude.

Can it be said that the Author is a Poet, and said thus but to make up the Verse, which otherwise wold not have falne so fitly? surely no, for a yong versifier can soone shew how the verses might have run aswell as they do, if hee had not purposely laboured to sort his verse to his matter, and not the matter to the verse: For thus he might have said, *Detergere queo sanguine Christe tuo*. [O Christ, I am able to wash [them] away with your blood] with very little alteration. ... but he as truly endeavoured to magnifie the milke as the bloud, and therefore without any necessitie of the verse, gives the same power, place, & preheminece, in every respect to the milke as to the bloud: but had he bene as sound and sincere a Christian as he is a good Poet, he might in as good verses have given all the honour to Christ as he deserveth. (56)

Elsewhere – and worse still – the mother takes precedence of the son. Of the verses *Ergo Parens et Nate, meis advertite votis: | lac peto, depereo sanguinem: utrumque volo*, which Crashaw

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<sup>15</sup> *Amphitheatrum honoris*, 43–6 and 207 (Campion), 46–8 (Thomas Cottam/Cotham), 48–50 (Southwell), 50–53 (Henry Walpole), and 156ff. (Jesuits in English jails); Donne, *Pseudo-Martyr* (London 1610), 150. On the timing of Donne’s conversion, see David Colclough’s *ODNB* entry.

<sup>16</sup> As translated by Crashaw: ‘Doth Ire belch fire, or lust like Aetna smoketh? | eyther the *blood* or milke this fervor choketh. | Doth envyes rust enroule me round about? | this *milke*, or that same blood soones scoures it out’ (9).

<sup>17</sup> Additional ‘with’ omitted.

translates as ‘Mother and Sonne give eare to what I crave: | I begge this milke, that blood, and both would have’ (8–9), he comments: ‘is it not strange to see how he marshalls them in the order of his judgement and affection? he prayeth to the mother and the sonne: but first to the *mother*, hee will have both milke and bloud, but first *milke*: thus *Mary* hath the precedence of *Christ*, and her milke of his blood’ (59). Again, he heads off readerly objections that the verse might be driving the thought, showing how the poem’s theological enormities could be easily mitigated:

But you will say it is not that hee so esteemes them in his judgement, but onely for the necessitie of the verse: the answeere is that a grammer scholler, can soone shewe how the verse is as good, and give *Christ* his precedence, as it is doing him this wrong: *Ergo Nate parens[que] meis advertite votis*, [Therefore, Son and Parent, incline to my prayers.] But he stil keeping *Christ* in *wardship* and under age, held it not fit that he should have the place before his mother onely, and therefore without all necessitie even wittingly and wilfully, he puts *Christ* in the second place. (59)

One of Crashaw’s strategies, as this shows, is creative redrafting. Yet it does not suit his case to present Bonarscius as poetically inept, someone whose heresies only arose from over-rigid versifying; the attack casts him instead as someone clever and well-educated enough to know better, who has been caught out by his own sophistry.

Crashaw’s treatise was soon answered from the Jesuit camp, in John Floyd’s *The Overthrow of the Protestants Pulpit-Babels* (1612).<sup>18</sup> Floyd too uses literary considerations to foment his ire, though his strategies are different – he is, after all, rebutting a piece of literary criticism rather than an actual poem. Where Crashaw represents Bonarscius as a good poet horribly mistaken – at one point, he says ‘Whether the verse be better or the matter worse is hard to tell’ (5) – Floyd represents Crashaw as hardly understanding ‘the elegancies of the Latyn language’ (49) and tone-deaf to literary considerations. At one point, for instance, he accuses Crashaw of failing to pick up on a well-known classical allusion. Where the poem’s speaker says to Christ ‘A Saviour shew thy self to soule opprest, | If thy bloud be more noble then the rest’, Floyd comments:

This Minister will needes accuse the Jesuits of doubting whether Christs bloud be more noble then any other, because the Jesuite maketh an (*if*) thereof which

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<sup>18</sup> This was published under the initials ‘I.R.’: for authorship, see the *English Short-Title Catalogue*, citation number S102371.

implyeth doubt. But would it please you to send your preacher to some Grammer schoole of Jesuits, he should be taught that (*si, if*) is not ever<sup>19</sup> a doubting particle but sometymes most asseverative, specially in obsecrations, in which that particle used of something which is certayne, doth with great force affirme, making the speach more elegant, and the obsecration more earnest. (49)<sup>20</sup>

Giving the example of Dido beseeching Aeneas in *Aeneid* 4 (317–18), *Si bene quid de te merui, fuit aut tibi quicquam | dulce meum, miserere*, he further remarks:

Did *Dido* doubt whether she had bestowed great good turnes on *Aeneas*? shee knew them well ... And yet she maketh an (*if*) of what she made no doubt, ... putting him in mynd of what he knew and was apparent, and she did much desire he should remember. And this elegancy is used in this verse most sweetly, representing unto Christ the dignity of his precious blood above all other, and obtesting [adjuring] him by the same, to blot out therwith the multitude of his sinnes. (49–50)

Elsewhere, Floyd declares that Crashaw shows no understanding of literary conventions and has completely misunderstood the register of Bonarscius' poem: 'This then is the first mistaking or folly, wherin he runneth on to the very end of his Ghospell, making no difference betwixt an Evangelist, and a Poet, a Ghospell, and poeme, rigid truth & figurative speach, articles of faith, and poetically fancyes' (40). Yet the phrase 'rigid truth & figurative speach' is one of many moments where Floyd discreetly signals that, while he has a high regard for Mary's milk, he would not place it on a level with Christ's blood except in the context of poetic discourse. Another comes when he accuses Crashaw of being crass enough to 'gather a Ghospell out of a Poeme', asserting that Bonarscius' effusion is 'not written historically, or doctrinally, but in patheticall verse, full of metaphors[,] Metonomi's, Apostroph's, Prosopopei's, and other aswell Rhetoricall figures, as poetically flowers, which to take in a proper and rigorous sense is folly' (37). In a literary context – and never more so than within Counter-Reformation proselytising – imaginative stimuli often matter more than literal truths when writers wish to prod their audiences into an edifying emotional engagement with religious subject-matter.<sup>21</sup> Yet, Floyd

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<sup>19</sup> I.e. 'is not always'.

<sup>20</sup> *Ergo redemptorem monstra te iure vocari | Nobilior reliquis si tibi sanguis inest*, translated by Crashaw as: 'Shew thy redeeming power to soules opprest: | thou Sonne, if that thy *blood* excell the rest' (*Jesuites Gospel*, 10–11; the passage is discussed in detail at 81–2). Floyd appears to be translating these lines himself, perhaps to give a more literal rendering of *nobilior* than Crashaw does.

<sup>21</sup> Tarantino 2021: 38–9.



contends, this should hardly need to be spelt out in relation to Bonarscius' imaginative efforts: 'to urge them as points, and articles of faith is such a solemne foolery that it may seeme the next degree unto madnes it self, which was to present the figures and flowers of the Poeme to be condemned in *the Parliament*,<sup>22</sup> as heresy, & Catholicks in that respect to be pronounced hereticks. Truly I thinke midsommer moone had never the like influence in any Minister or mad-man, Bachelour, or Bedlame before' (37). This comically turns the tables on Crashaw and his kind, yet also circumscribes suspicions that the poem could be genuinely troublesome if taken the wrong way.

Floyd – who was, after all, a Jesuit writing about another Jesuit – is not overtly criticising Bonarscius. Yet Bonarscius' poem adopts an extreme imaginative position, and Floyd is aware of how problematic it could look – among Catholics as well as Protestants. In his time, as now, Catholics venerated the Virgin Mary above any other saint.<sup>23</sup> Yet many would have welcomed the opportunity to criticize a Jesuit commentator or found the assertion of complete equality between mother and son unacceptable in a theological context. Though popular Catholic piety has long had a *de facto* tendency to place Mary on a level with God, this has never been theologically ratified. Even the idea of her being a co-redemptrix – playing a subordinate but essential part in man's salvation – has never been fully accepted as Catholic doctrine, despite existing at least since Irenaeus' work in the second century CE and permeating the commonplace typological notion that she reversed Eve's sin.<sup>24</sup> So, however highly one might regard Mary's milk, the idea of equality between it and Christ's blood could only be justified as a literary conceit. Given that conceits are supposed to be provocative, a degree of theological audacity could even be seen as desirable in that context – but everything depends on recognising exaggeration when one sees it.

*'The mother then must suck the son': Richard Crashaw's epigram*

This tripartite literary and polemical exchange – Bonarscius' poem, Crashaw's Protestant refutation of it, and Floyd's response to Crashaw – had a long afterlife; Crashaw's treatise, in

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<sup>22</sup> This references Crashaw's parting address to 'this most Honorable and reverend assembly of the church & Com[m]on-wealth of England' (*Jesuites Gospel*, 106).

<sup>23</sup> *Catholic Encyclopaedia*, 'dulia'.

<sup>24</sup> Mackenzie 1978; Steenberg 2004; Williamson 2000.

particular, was reprinted more than once under different titles.<sup>25</sup> The debate was often cited by other controversialists: in the late seventeenth century, for instance, William Gough advises readers interested in Bonarscius' poem to enquire at booksellers' shops in St Paul's Churchyard or to look at the discussion of it in James Wadsworth's *Memoires* (1679), which draws heavily on Crashaw.<sup>26</sup> In 1682, when Gough was writing, the so-called 'Popish Plot', the political hysteria inspired by Titus Oates' anti-Catholic fantasies, would have given a whole new context to extreme Catholic piety (Knights 1994). But the best-known legacy of the controversy is an epigram written by Richard Crashaw – son of William, Laudian high-churchman turned Catholic convert, and a standard point of comparison to such well-known seventeenth-century religious poets as John Donne and George Herbert. This epigram, 'Blessed be the paps which thou hast sucked', features in Crashaw's maiden publication, *Epigrammatum sacrorum liber* (1634), a compilation of undergraduate compositions which appeared in the year he received his Cambridge BA.<sup>27</sup> While some critics have linked it to *The Jesuites Gospel*, none have examined its pronounced resonances with the Latin poem that inspired Crashaw senior's diatribe.<sup>28</sup> Yet Richard Crashaw's poem works best if read both as a riposte to Bonarscius' poem and as an intervention in the controversy that it inspired.

The epigram refers to how Christ was acclaimed by a woman of Jerusalem: '[She] lifted up her voice, and said unto him, Blessed is the womb that bare thee, and the paps which thou hast sucked' (Luke 11:27). In the original Latin, it runs as follows:

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<sup>25</sup> A second edition of *The Jesuites Gospel* appeared in 1621; a third, entitled *The Bepotted Jesuite*, in 1642 (dated 1641), reissued in 1643 under the title *Loyola's Disloyalty* (*English Short-Title Catalogue*).

<sup>26</sup> Gough, *Londinum triumphans* (1682), p. 117; Wadsworth, *Memoirs*, 11–32. Gough's sympathies were Whiggish; Wadsworth is writing an anti-Catholic autobiography (*ODNB*). See also Thomas Brown, *The Reasons of Mr Bays* [John Dryden] *Changing his Religion* (1st ed. 1688), p. 3.

<sup>27</sup> Vincent 2019: 247–51. – See Thomas Healy's entry on Richard Crashaw in the *ODNB*.

<sup>28</sup> Warren 1939: 213; Kuchar 2005: 96–7. On themes of milk and blood in other epigrams written by Crashaw, see Vincent 2019: 248–51.

*Et quid si biberet Jesus vel ab ubere vestro?  
Quid facit ad vestram, quòd bibit ille, sitim?  
Ubera mox sua et Hic (ò quàm non lactea!) pandet:  
e nato Mater tum bibet ipsa suo.*<sup>29</sup>

As translated by Crashaw, it reads:

Suppose he had been tabled at thy teats,  
Thy hunger feels not what he eats:  
He'll have his teat ere long (a bloody one)  
The mother then must suck the son.<sup>30</sup>

The poem revisits the familiar comparison of Mary's milk and Christ's blood, but imagines it in terms that – as so often in mysticism – are graphically carnal; the pious commonplace of Mary standing for the Christian believer, nourished by Christ's blood, becomes an intimate, quasi-incestuous congress between mother and son. For generations of critics, this poem seemed a powerful reason to downgrade Crashaw aesthetically and morally: William Empson, for instance, commented that 'a wide variety of sexual perversions can be included in the notion of sucking a long bloody teat which is also a deep wound'.<sup>31</sup> More recently it has lent itself well to psychoanalytic criticism undertaken in a less judgemental spirit: Maureen Sabine, for instance, has examined it in the light of Julia Kristeva's work on bodily fluids, which – Kristeva argues – inspire horror and disgust by transgressing physical boundaries between the individual and the outside world.<sup>32</sup> Crashaw's most recent editor, Richard Rambuss, reads him through the prism of queer theory, seeing him as giving space to sexualities traditionally regarded as

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<sup>29</sup> Luc. 11.27. *Beatus venter et ubera, etc.: Epigrammatum sacrorum liber* (Cambridge, 1634), 40: quoted from Richard Crashaw, *Complete Poetry*, ed. by George Walton Williams (New York 1972), no. 165 (pp. 324–25). Williams supplies a more literal translation than Crashaw's own: 'And what if Jesus should indeed drink from your breast? / what does it do to your thirst because he drinks? / And soon He will lay bare his breast – alas, not milky! – / from her son then the *mother* will drink.'

<sup>30</sup> From Richard Rambuss (ed.), *The English Poems of Richard Crashaw* (Minneapolis 2013), 23.

<sup>31</sup> *Seven Types of Ambiguity* (London 1947), 221. Empson's comment may be inflected by the fact that – given the convention of the long 's' – 'suck' and 'fuck' can look very similar in early modern texts.

<sup>32</sup> Kristeva 1980; Mintz 1999; Kuchar 2005: 105–18; Sabine 2006: 432–40. – For a biographically inflected anticipation of this interest, see George Walton Williams, *Image and Symbol in the Sacred Poetry of Richard Crashaw* (Columbia 1963), 123–5, 'Protection and Nourishment'.

deviant.<sup>33</sup> Biographical criticism has also had a part to play, given that Richard Crashaw's conversion to Catholicism would, on one level, have been a rebellion against his father.<sup>34</sup>

Though these and similar lines of enquiry have often yielded stimulating and convincing readings, Crashaw junior's imaginative world was also shaped by external literary and historical factors – Neo-Latin poetry among them. Assuming that Richard Crashaw read his father's work – a hypothesis so likely that the burden of proof must be the other way –, Bonarscius' poem would have been one such, and so would *The Jesuites Gospel*.<sup>35</sup> Certainly, seeing 'Blessed be the paps' as a contribution to the argument begun by Richard Crashaw's seniors explains several of its unusual features. Its speaker appears to begin half-way through a conversation: so much so that, in the English version, Christ is referred to obliquely as 'he'. The poem's reproachful tone is equally striking. Picking up on Christ's own answer to the woman of Jerusalem – 'But he said, Yea rather, blessed *are* they that hear the word of God, and keep it' (Luke 11:28) –, it rebukes anyone who might point to the nurturing mother behind the great man and the female agency that implies. On the face of it, this seems more appropriate as a riposte to the woman of Jerusalem than to the Virgin herself. Yet since the latter is an inescapable referent in a poem about motherhood, sonship and Christ, it would also recall and correct the ambitious assertions made by Bonarscius on Mary's behalf.

For other reasons too, the poem works best if read as potentially addressing both the woman of Jerusalem and Mary: the reference to breastfeeding is only conditional, and 'the mother' is a term general enough to encompass both women.<sup>36</sup> But either way, as Crashaw imagines it, the mother's nurturing role is kept to a minimum. Of the line 'Thy hunger feels not what he eats', Rambuss comments, 'Jesus was an ascetic even when a nursing infant at his mother's breast' – with the implication that the mother's need for Christ is greater than Christ's for the mother.<sup>37</sup> The poem flirts with Catholicism – Crashaw is addressing the Virgin, at which most Protestants would have raised their eyebrows –, but his relegation of her to second place is very much in keeping with the argument advanced in *The Jesuites Gospel*. One should not allow

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<sup>33</sup> Crashaw 2013; see also Rambuss 1998; Ferguson 2018.

<sup>34</sup> Roberts 1985.

<sup>35</sup> In addition to the example discussed below, L.C. Martin suggests William Crashaw's translation of Bonarscius as an analogue to 'Luke 16. Dives asking a drop', another of Richard Crashaw's sacred epigrams: Crashaw, *The Poems, English, Latin and Greek*, ed. L.C. Martin (Oxford 1927; 2nd ed. Oxford 1957), 96, 435.

<sup>36</sup> On this point, see Kuchar 2005: 107. Walton Williams, however, sees the poem as addressed first to the woman of Jerusalem, then to 'maternity in general': Crashaw, *Complete Poetry*, no. 17 (p. 14).

<sup>37</sup> Crashaw 2013: 326.

Crashaw's subsequent conversion to Catholicism to obscure the fact that this poem is highly critical of Bonarscius, and hence taking sides against him and Floyd with Crashaw senior.<sup>38</sup> The mother may be sucking the son, but Richard Crashaw was drawing on his father.

### *Conclusion*

Richard Crashaw has often been seen as a poetic outlier, belonging more on the Catholic Continent than in Protestant England. Tracing the connections from Bonarscius to 'Blessed be the paps' does show common ground between his work and the devotional poetry written by Catholic Neo-Latinists of his era.<sup>39</sup> Yet such trains of allusion also help to recover the Catholic presence in post-Reformation English literature: sometimes vilified – even in the recent past – by literary critics whom William Crashaw prefigured, and often ignored to this day.<sup>40</sup> Conversely, the epigram shows what Richard Crashaw took from attitudes typical within his native church. Like any interesting poet, he has a singular imagination, but claims about his oddness have been exaggerated because literary critics have not read religious polemic as often as they might. That said, the epigram's colourful critical history does prompt reflection on the historical contingencies of disapproval. As commented above, many of Richard Crashaw's nineteenth- and twentieth-century detractors recoiled from what they saw as a celebration of perverse sexuality. In considering Christ's blood and Mary's milk, William Crashaw was as nauseated as they; but it was a Protestant nausea, prompted by Bonarscius' notion that Mary and Christ could be thought of as comparably efficacious in man's salvation.

Finally, this essay contends that William and Richard Crashaw, despite their eventual confessional differences, had more in common than their family ties – not least when it came to literariness. Though William Crashaw's emphasis is on ideological issues, he addresses these via literary evaluation, a close interrogation of style and an attention to the poet's craft, highly unusual among polemicists of his era. With its point-by-point, line-by-line analysis of Bonarscius' poem, addressing diction, imagery, syntax and authorial tone, *The Jesuites Gospel* is one of the earliest examples in vernacular English of what we now call close reading. This activity was central to New Criticism, an Anglo-American formalist movement that profoundly

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<sup>38</sup> Crashaw did not revisit the poem for *Carmen Deo Nostro* (1652), a collection of Crashaw's verse issued under Catholic auspices that adapts and reprints several earlier pieces: *Poems*, ed. Rambuss, lvii.

<sup>39</sup> Graffius 2018.

<sup>40</sup> Roberts 1985.

influenced the evolution of literary studies within schools and universities during the twentieth century, and its adherents' focus on the subtleties of lyric poetry aided the present-day canonical centrality of John Donne and George Herbert, two of the Crashaws' contemporaries.<sup>41</sup> The New Critics minimized, or even repudiated, extrinsic literary-historical approaches to imaginative writing – yet, ironically, their preferred techniques closely resemble the exegesis of sacred texts, an area where the interpretation of stylistic details can have an immense impact on the outside world. Crashaw's religiously inspired close reading of Bonarscius' poem can be seen as a staging-post between biblical exegesis and the secularized endeavours of the New Critics, for whom a lyric poem deserved as much attention as a passage from scripture – if not more. Looked at from an English literature department in the twenty-first century, Crashaw's exercise also justifies concerns, often expressed by the successors of the New Critics, about the exclusion of historical factors from a literary critic's remit: not least in its very existence, a demonstration of how politics and polemic may drive formalism forward. Not without alliterative flourishes of his own, Floyd accused Crashaw of beating 'in the mortar of malice, with the pestell of his pistilent wit, every flower of this flagrant poeme, to get out venomous juice of some blasphemy'.<sup>42</sup> We might see Crashaw's innovative close reading, undertaken through the lens of Protestant outrage, as prefiguring the stimuli given to literary-critical analysis by culture wars nearer our own time.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> 'New Criticism', *The Oxford Companion to English Literature*, 7th edition, ed. Dinah Birch (Oxford 2009). The movement's major critical works include: I.A. Richards, *Practical Criticism* (1st ed. London 1929); John Crowe Ransom, *The New Criticism* (1st ed. Norfolk, Conn. 1941); Cleanth Brooks, *The Well-Wrought Urn: Studies in the Structure of Poetry* (1st ed. New York 1947); and William Empson, *Seven Types of Ambiguity* (1st ed. London 1930). Empson's assessment of Crashaw's epigram is quoted above. For recent evaluations of New Criticism, see Angus Connell Brown, 'Cultural Studies and Close Reading', *Proceedings of the Modern Language Association (PMLA)*, 132:5 (2017), 1187–93, and Jay Jin, 'Problems of Scale in "Close" and "Distant" Reading', *Philological Quarterly*, 96:1 (2017), 105–29.

<sup>42</sup> Floyd, *Overthrow*, p. 52. At this period, 'flagrant' tends to have connotations of ardour rather than scandal (*OED*).

<sup>43</sup> Cf. the arguments advanced by Cummings (2002) about how Reformation affected literary language.

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