



# Reading, Desire, and the Eucharist in Early Modern Religious Poetry

*Ryan Netzley*

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The courtly love tradition had a great influence on the themes of religious poetry—just as an absent beloved could be longed for passionately, so too could a distant God be the subject of desire. But when authors began to perceive God as immanently available, did the nature and interpretation of devotional verse change? Ryan Netzley argues that early modern religious lyrics presented both desire and reading as free, loving activities, rather than as endless struggles or dramatic quests.

*Reading, Desire, and the Eucharist* analyzes the work of prominent early modern writers—including John Milton, Richard Crashaw, John Donne, and George Herbert—whose religious poetry presented parallels between sacramental desire and the act of understanding written texts. Netzley finds that by directing devotees to crave spiritual rather than worldly goods, these poets questioned ideas not only of what people should desire, but also how they should engage in the act of yearning. Challenging fundamental assumptions of literary criticism, *Reading, Desire, and the Eucharist* shows how poetry can encourage love for its own sake, rather than in the hopes of salvation.

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