

<http://www.puritansermons.com/poetry/taylor.htm>

Edward Taylor (1642?-1729) *Contributing Editor*: Karen E. Rowe
Classroom Issues and Strategies

Students may recoil from Taylor's overly didactic, seemingly aesthetically rough or unpolished poetry, in part because he seems too preoccupied with issues of sin and salvation, which they find alien. The fundamental need is to familiarize students with basic Puritan concepts, biblical sources and allusions, and the meditative tradition. This background allows students and teachers to move beyond the easy post-Romantic definition of the poetry as "lyric" which locks the class into a quick survey of only the occasional poems. Taylor may also seem both too easy ("doesn't he tell it all?") and too complicated, because of arcane word choices, the curious compounding of images, and the plethora of biblical images. The organization of selections in *The Heath Anthology* permits one for the first time to trace Taylor's chronological development as a poet and also emphasizes a more personalized Taylor. By clustering the *Meditations* and engaging students in playing with the multiple meanings of curious words, the poetry comes alive as an intricate orchestration of recurrent themes and interconnected images. The point is to capture Taylor's imaginative flexibility as much as his tortured angst, while at the same time seeing all of his poetry as part of an overriding concern with personal preparation for heaven and with how Taylor as poet can best serve God--and in what language. Students respond initially to the personal anguish and graphic degradation to which Taylor submits himself, yet they are also quick to recognize the pattern of self-abasement followed by Christ's intervention and re-elevation of humankind. Through class discussion, they revise their thinking about both the seeming lack of sophistication in Taylor's poetry and the dismissal of Puritan poets.

Major Themes, Historical Perspectives, and Personal Issues Major, but different, themes and historical issues emerge from each selection. Metrical paraphrases of Psalms were acceptable "hymns" for Protestants, as reflected in the Massachusetts [Bay Psalm Book](#), although Taylor models his poems on the earlier Sternhold-Hopkins Psalter. Important themes include Taylor's adoption of David as his model for the poet; the concept of poetry as an act/offering of ritual praise; distinctions between the godly (righteous) and ungodly; God's power as Creator and Lawgiver; the righteous man as the Lord's

servant; Christ as a Rock and Redeemer; and God's voice as that which speaks truly and which man's voice merely echoes. As Thomas Davis suggests, by "providing a means of fashioning his own experience in the framework of biblical and historical precedent, the paraphrases invited the poet to make poetry a central concern in his life," and with the emergence of an "authentic note of his own voice" point directly to the *Preparatory Meditations*. Probably completed in 1680, *Gods Determinations* usefully introduces students to Taylor's major dilemmas as preacher and individual saint--how to ascertain and sustain the belief in one's place among God's Elect and what standards of admission to uphold for Church membership. In its historical context, *Gods Determinations* reflects Taylor's local need to found a frontier Church for the true Elect (1679). His battles were against both the wilderness and Indians without and Satan within. This mini-sequence from among the total thirty-five poems allows one to talk about the difficult progress from conversion to justification and sanctification in two ways. A narrative reading opens with the magnificent evocation of God's creation, then the "Souls Groan" for salvation and "Christ's Reply" as a lover or mother to a lost child, counseling the soul to "Repent thy Sin," and accept Christ's purifying grace, followed by Satan's renewed attempts at casting doubt, and the final triumphant entry into "Church Fellowship rightly attended," whether on earth or in heaven. Hence, the poem becomes a narrative of a spiritual journey. Taylor's position is as narrator and as voice of the saint. One can also read the poems as a "debate," emphasizing various oppositions, between God and fallen man, the unworthy Elect soul and grace-giving Christ, the doubting soul and Satan the tempter, between Christ and Satan, hence between lowly earthly things and God's grandeur, being outside the covenant community of Elect saints and being within (the coach), between doubt and assurance, sin and salvation. The poems also anticipate later allegorical renderings of Christ's marital relationships with the Church and individual soul in terms of the Dove and the Bride, set off against images of Satan as a mongrel cur and his deceptive seductions, hence a battle between loving faith/grace and distorting reason. The Occasional Poems, which include eight numbered poems, were probably begun in the early 1680s, just as Taylor had completed *Gods Determinations* and was initiating the second version of the Psalm paraphrases and the early *Preparatory Meditations*. Because these poems are the most "lyrical," they are more accessible to modern students. But what motivates Taylor is a desire to meditate upon natural "occurrences" in order to extract allegorical or spiritual meanings. Taylor's fondness for extended metaphors is apparent in "Upon a Spider Catching a Fly" and his famous "Huswifery." The latter leads to discussion of Taylor's frequent use of spinning and weaving terms, frequently in relationship to poetic language or the need for the "Wedding garment" of

righteousness that robes mankind for the Lord's Supper and union with Christ. "Upon Wedlock, & Death of Children" reveals Taylor at his most personal and usefully links with other poems from *Edward Taylor's Minor Poetry*, which trace his domestic relationship with Elizabeth Fitch from his courtship (1674) to her death (1689). "A Valediction to all the World preparatory for Death" permits comparisons among different versions, showing Taylor's substantial revision of late poems even during a time of severe illness. Although only two of the total eight canticles are included in *The Heath Anthology*, they nevertheless display Taylor in the process of shedding worldliness, particularly all things that appeal to the senses and sensualities of the flesh. His "farewell" to the world, the flesh, and the devil is renunciatory and poignant, a meditation on "vanity of vanities, all is vanity" (Ecclesiastes 12:6-8) that evokes the very fondness for created nature that he appears to abjure. "A Fig for thee Oh! Death" expresses Taylor's defiance of death, and it is a *memento mori* meditation that should be placed side by side with his later Canticles poems, in which he envisions the beauties of heaven. His anticipation of the final judgment and reunion of body and soul gives rise to an ecstatic affirmation of faith in the divine promise of eternal life. As a complete sequence, the poems selected here, together with those from the *Preparatory Meditations*, trace Taylor's preoccupation over a lifetime:

- from the early focus on creation to the later renunciation of earthly vanities
- from his earliest attempt to map the soul's conflicts with Satan to his later celebration of Church fellowship, the Lord's Supper, and Christ as the divine host
- from his domestic espousal to his spiritual union with Christ as the eternal Bridegroom
- from his questioning of poetic status to his desire to be another David or Solomon, singing hymns for all eternity
- from his entrance into the minister's life to his death--the end of a long preparation recorded in a virtual poetic autobiography

Significant Form, Style, or Artistic Conventions Taylor's verse experiments range from the common meter of the Psalm paraphrases to the varied stanza and metrical forms in *Gods Determinations* and the Occasional Poems, and finally to the heroic couplets of "A Valediction to all the World preparatory for Death" and "A Fig for thee Oh! Death." Variety also appears in Taylor's choice of forms, including the Psalm paraphrases, a debate or narrative sequence of lyrics in *Gods Determinations*, elegies, love poems, a valediction and reflection on worldly vanities, and *memento mori* -- all of which were commonplace among his English predecessors, such as John

Donne, George Herbert, and Henry Vaughan. For a more in-depth study of form, students might be urged to read and compare Taylor's elegies on public figures with those on personal losses, such as "Upon Wedlock, & Death of Children" and "A Funerall Poem upon . . . Mrs. Elizabeth Taylor," all in *Edward Taylor's Minor Poetry*. Taylor's form and style seem too predictable, because of the unchanging six-line, iambic pentameter, ababcc stanza of the *Preparatory Meditations*. Discussion should relate his use of a disciplined, even caged and controlled, verse form to his concept of poetry as ritualistic praise, as a rational framework within which to explore (and contain) irrational impulses of the rebellious soul, as a stimulus to imaginative imagistic variations, and as a habitual exercise of spiritual preparation. These poems are meditative self-examinations, illustrating the Puritan requirement to prepare the heart and soul before entering the Church or partaking of (and administering) the Lord's Supper. They also mediate between Taylor's composition and delivery of his Sacrament sermon. Taylor's imagistic variations in the *Preparatory Meditations* permit one to teach him in different combinations and ways. Structurally, the poems reflect differing manipulations of image patterns, such as the focus on a single metaphor ("Prologue," 1.6, 1.8, 2.50); figural images and interpretations (1.8, 2.1, 2.26, 2.50, 2.60B); allegorical panoramas of salvation history (1.8, 2.50); associational tumbings of images (2.26, 2.43, 2.60B, 2.115); magnifications and diminutions ("Prologue," 2.43); and allegorical love poems that anatomize the Bridegroom's and Spouse's beauties (2.115). Thematically, poems cluster around recurrent ideas, such as Christ's nature and life (1.8, 2.43, 2.60B, 2.115); man's nature and estate (1.6, 1.8, 2.1, 2.26, 2.50); Old Testament types (persons, events, ceremonies) that foreshadow New Testament fulfillments in Christ (2.1, 2.26, 2.50); the Lord's Supper as sacramental feast (1.8, 2.60B); the marriage of Christ to his Bride, signifying the Church and individual soul (2.115); and the necessity of poetic praise ("Prologue," 2.43). As a study of Puritan preparationism and aesthetics, the meditations also reveal Taylor's yearnings to celebrate the Lord's Supper with a cleansed soul, robed for the feast in the wedding garment of righteousness for the feast (2.26, 2.60B, 2.115), and to create poetry as a medium for spiritual purging and preparation ("Prologue," 2.43). Chronologically, the *Meditations* open with the first series' dichotomy between mankind (a "Crumb," yet imprinted with the divine "Image, and Inscription") and the perfect Christ of the Incarnation ("Heaven's Sugar Cake"). In keeping with a reorientation in Taylor's preaching, the second series begins anew with the Old Testament typology (2.1, 2.26). He then shifts to a focus on the Christologic of the New Testament (2.43, 2.50) in poems that correspond with the *Christographia* sermons, then to *Meditations on the Lord's Supper* (2.60B, 2.102-111), and finally to the *Canticles*

(2.115), Taylor's most sensual love poems, which anticipate the heavenly union beyond death (as also in the "Valediction"). Finally, the poems can be organized to reflect the context and progress of mankind's existence, beginning with the magnificence of the creation in the "Preface" to *Gods Determinations* and the providential schema mapped out in Meditation 2.50. Man's fallen nature (2.1, 2.26) yet divine aspirations (1.6) necessitate Christ's intervention and redemptive grace, brought about through His incarnation (1.8, 2.1), shedding of blood (2.60B) on the cross, and His eternal Godhead (2.43). Mankind's spiritual pilgrimage, like Taylor's, concludes with the anticipation of the espousal between Elect souls and Christ (2.115), and of the heavenly feast, which the Lord's Supper commemorates and foreshadows (1.8, 2.60B, "Valediction").

Original Audience Taylor never published his poetry, although he carefully transcribed many poems in the manuscript "Poetical Works." A consideration of audience must, therefore, take account of the fact that the elegies and perhaps *Gods Determinations* were written in a more public mode, but that the majority of his Occasional Poems, the *Preparatory Meditations*, and the later "Valediction" and "A Fig for thee Oh! Death" are intensely personal, written it would seem for an audience of God or Christ alone, or as meditative self-examinations of Taylor's soul. As readers, we eavesdrop on Taylor, but we are not easily invited into the poems, except insofar as we identify with the Elect soul in its struggles or with Taylor as a representative pilgrim in his journey toward salvation.

Comparisons, Contrasts, Connections Fruitful comparisons can be drawn both intratextually and extratextually. For the *Preparatory Meditations*, corresponding sermons are extant from *Upon the Types of the Old Testament* (Meditations 2.1, 2.26, 2.60B) and from the *Christographia* (Meditations 2.43, 2.50). Edward Taylor's *Treatise Concerning the Lord's Supper*, notably Sermon 4, yields excellent excerpts on the need to prepare for the Lord's Supper and the wearing of the "wedden garment" for the feast. Because Taylor habitually clusters poems on the same biblical text, providing students, for example, with all three Meditations (1.8-10) on John 6:51, 55, "I am the Living Bread," and "My Blood is Drink indeed," contextualizes a reading of Meditation 1.8 and of the Lord's Supper. Similarly, a short typological series, such as 2.58-61, permits a study of Taylor's fascination with the Exodus of Israel from Egypt and with the various types that foreshadow man's spiritual journey to salvation under the New Testament, as well as a more specific contextualizing of Meditation 2.60B on the "Rock of Horeb." Meditations 2.102-111 combine a theological defense with a festal celebration of the Lord's

Supper, and the Canticles series that opens with Meditation 2.115 yields many examples of Taylor's interpretation of sensual imagery. Comparisons with George Herbert's *The Temple*, particularly poems on the types, with John Donne's sonnets on the Ascension, death, and Christ as Spouse, and of Meditations 2.24 and 2.50 with contemporary Christmas poems on the Incarnation by Herbert, Southwell, and Milton enable students to identify different poetic styles and to place Taylor in a broader seventeenth-century meditative tradition. One might also compare [Anne Bradstreet](#)'s "The Prologue" and "Author to her Book" with Taylor's meditations on poetic craft in "Were but my Muse an Huswife Good," the "Prologue" to the *Preparatory Meditations*, and Meditation 2.43. Bradstreet's "Vanity of all Worldly Things," and "The Flesh and the Spirit" complement Taylor's "Valediction," and her poems "In Reference to Her Children 23 June 1659" and "Before the Birth of One of her Children" work in tandem with Taylor's "Upon Wedlock, & Death of Children," as do Bradstreet's several elegies on various grandchildren ("In Memory of my Dear Grandchild Elizabeth Bradstreet" and "On my Dear Grandchild Simon Bradstreet"). Selections from the prose meditations of Bradstreet also provide an intriguing counterpoint to Taylor's poetic meditations.

Presentational and Strategic Approaches It proves particularly helpful to provide students with background information about key Puritan concepts, some of which are detailed in the headnote for the Edward Taylor selections. Many of these should also be discussed in relationship to other Puritan texts. But one can also prepare handouts on typology by listing Taylor's sermons and poems on the types (see *Saint and Singer*); a diagram of Israel's tabernacle and temple and its furnishings, together with a synopsis of the role of the High Priest and of the significant ceremonies; excerpts from a good Bible dictionary on major biblical figures or events; or pre-distributed excerpts from key biblical passages related to a poem's imagery. Visual arts only approximate the verbal, but Vaughan's emblem of the stony heart from *Silex Scintillans* for "The Ebb & Flow" or Renaissance paintings of death's heads ("A Fig"), worldly vanities and the heavenly Paradise ("Valediction"), Christ, and the Lord's Supper instructively guide the textual analysis. A diagram labeling parts of the spinning wheel and spinning process illustrate Taylor's love of using weaving, looms, and webs as metaphors for poetry and for the construction of the self in "Huswifery." Comparing metaphysical with typological conceits stimulates discussion about poetic technique (e.g., Meditations 2.50 on Old Testament types and New Testament fulfillments, and 2.60B on Christ as the Rock of Horeb). Finally, reading poems aloud in class captures the surprisingly personal voice and intensity of many poems.

Questions for Reading and Discussion/ Approaches to Writing 1.

Specific questions can be generated easily for most poems, but it helps students (not only with Taylor but also with the study of other Puritan literature) to ask them to research key terms, using Donald Stanford's glossary, a well-annotated Bible with a concordance, such as the New Scofield Reference edition, Johnson's *The Poetical Works of Edward Taylor*, or the *Milton Encyclopedia*. Terms might include Elect/election, covenant, baptism, Lord's Supper, preparation, law, grace, typology, providential history, apostasy, marriage, the Dove, the Rock, first fruits, offerings/sacrifices, Adam and Eve, the Garden of Eden, the Fall, Passover, the Exodus, Christ's incarnation, the crucifixion and resurrection, the Bride and Bridegroom, New Jerusalem, and the Second Coming. One can assign students to look up the Bible verses mentioned in the footnotes or to read selections from Genesis, Exodus, Psalms, Canticles, the Gospel, Hebrews, and Revelation. Because of Taylor's playfulness with different meanings of a single image, students might be asked to look up in the *Oxford English Dictionary* the complete history of "fillet," "squitchen," "screw" and "pins," "knot," "kenning," "huswifery" "cocks," or "escutcheon" (one word each, perhaps). They might research the construction of the spinning wheel, thumbscrews and rack, tenon and mortise carpentry, the tabernacle and temple, a mint, and an alembic. Such preparation frequently alerts students to Taylor's multiple strands of imagery, his tricky punning, even humorous use of language, and the variety of areas from which he draws images and metaphors (architecture, horticulture, heraldry, carpentry, clothing, bookbinding, warfare, alchemy, music, classical mythology, history, printing, domestic chores).

2. Obvious paper assignments involve interpretive readings of poems not otherwise studied in class. Advanced students can be encouraged to compare Genesis as the principal creation story with Taylor's rendering in Psalm 19, the "Preface" to *Gods Determinations*, Meditation 2.50, and his "Valediction to all the World preparatory for Death." Analysis of different strands of imagery that cut across several poems allows students to see Taylor's recurrent methods and themes, as with the water, blood, and wine associated with Christ and the Lord's Supper. Similar assignments might be made around the concepts of the feast, marriage, the garden, reciprocal relationships (master and servant, Bridegroom/Beloved and the Bride/Spouse, God and the Elect), or around broad areas of imagery, such as purification by fire, water, and blood ("Christ's Reply," "The Ebb and Flow," 2.1, 2.26, 2.60B) and writing/imprinting ("Prologue," 1.6, 2.43, 2.50, "Valediction").

3. Creative writing assignments also immerse students in the complexities of Taylor's artistry, while challenging them to write poetry that captures his fundamental theological concepts and the Puritan vision of mankind's history and life in relationship to Christ. Students can be asked to compose a paraphrase (or a musical hymn) of a Psalm; to

choose a biblical verse (perhaps one of Taylor's own), a dominant image, or Old Testament type in order to create a preparatory meditation imitative of Taylor's metrical form and imagistic techniques; to write a lyric on a natural "occurent" or domestic event; to imagine a valediction or *memento mori* poem reflecting the vanity of this world and the joys of the heavenly paradise; to use Canticles as a model for a love poem either written to Elizabeth Fitch, Taylor's wife, or as a celebration of the anticipated nuptials between Taylor and Christ as Bride and Bridegroom; or to generate a debate (in allegorical form perhaps) between Christ and Satan over man's soul. Students may also choose to create two poems on the same subject that reflect the different style and poetic forms preferred by Anne Bradstreet and Edward Taylor.

Teaching Issues and Interpretation Placing Taylor in the context of other Puritan literature becomes illuminating in two ways because it responds to the question of what is poetry supposed to be and do. First, Taylor's work shows how the Puritan emphasis on spiritual examination of the individual soul can take the form of meditative and autobiographical poetry. Poetry for Taylor is both an immediate preparation for his ministerial administering of the Lord's Supper *and* a lifelong preparation for eternal life. Students often stumble with Taylor's poetry because they do not understand how intensely Taylor renounces this world in favor of a spiritual life within and a heavenly life yet to come. But they can identify with the human psychology of doubt, fear, loss, and a need for some form of consoling grace, comfort, or higher being to give meaning to the innately corrupt heart. Second, because Taylor is the most prolific poet of America's first two hundred years (the anomaly of a "poet in the wilderness"), his meditations open up the question of a supposed Puritan disdain for poetry. Taylor's own puzzling over the proper uses of poetic language appears in "Were but my Muse an Huswife Good," the "Prologue" to the *Preparatory Meditations*, Meditation 2.43, and "A Valediction to all the World." By setting Taylor in a seventeenth-century tradition of paraphrases of Psalms, Job, and Canticles and, thus, the sanctioned acceptance of Biblical poetry, and of a respect for *Sola Scriptura* as the model of language to be imitated, students can begin to appreciate the roots of an American tradition of poetry. The association of Taylor with David and Solomon as biblical models of poets becomes a useful endpoint for discussion because it points to Taylor's hope for his role in heaven, validates poetry as a medium of spiritual expression acceptable to God, sets the standards for "a transcendent style," and defines poetry as a ritual (meditative) offering of praise and worship. **Huswifery**

by Edward Taylor

Make me, O Lord, thy Spinning Wheele compleat;

Thy Holy Worde my Distaff make for mee.

Make mine Affections thy Swift Flyers neate,

And make my Soule thy holy Spoole to bee.

My Conversation make to be thy Reelee,

And reele the yarn thereon spun of thy Wheele.

Make me thy Looome then, knit therein this Twine:

And make thy Holy Spirit, Lord, winde quills:

Then weave the Web thyselfe. The yarn is fine.

Thine Ordinances make my Fulling Mills.

Then dy the same in Heavenly Colours Choice,

All pinkt with Varnish't Flowers of Paradise.

Then cloath therewith mine Understanding, Will,

Affections, Judgment, Conscience, Memory;

My Words and Actions, that their shine may fill

My wayes with glory and thee glorify.

Then mine apparell shall display before yee

That I am Cloathd in Holy robes for glory.

Edward Taylor:

The son of a non-Conformist yeoman farmer, Taylor was born in 1642 at [Sketchley, Leicestershire](#), England. Following restoration of the monarchy and the Act of Uniformity under Charles II, which cost Taylor his teaching position, he emigrated in 1688 to the [Massachusetts Bay Colony](#) in America. He chronicled his Atlantic crossing and early years in America (from April 26, 1668, to July 5, 1671) in his now-published *Diary*. [1] He was admitted to Harvard College as a second year student soon after arriving in America and upon graduation in 1671 became pastor and physician at Westfield, on the remote western frontier of Massachusetts, where he remained until his death on June 29, 1729. He was twice married, first to Elizabeth Fitch, by whom he had eight children, five of whom died in childhood, and at her death to Ruth Wyllys, who bore six more children.[2]

Taylor's poems, in leather bindings of his own manufacture, survived him, but he had left instructions that his heirs should "never publish any of his writings," and the poems remained all but forgotten for more than 200 years.[3] In 1937 Thomas H. Johnson discovered a 400-page quarto manuscript of Taylor's poetry in the library of [Yale University](#) and published a selection from it in *The New England Quarterly*. The appearance of these poems, wrote Taylor's biographer Norman S. Grabo, "established [Taylor] almost at once and without quibble as not only America's finest colonial poet, but as one of the most striking writers in the whole range of American literature." [4] His most important poems, the first sections of *Preparatory Meditations* (1682–1725) and *God's Determinations Touching His Elect* (c. 1680), were published shortly after their discovery. His complete poems, however, were not published until 1960. He is the only major American poet to have written in the [metaphysical](#) style.

Taylor's poems were an expression of his deeply held religious views, acquired during a strict upbringing and shaped in adulthood by New England Congregationalist [Puritans](#), who developed during the 1630s and 1640s rules far more demanding than those of their co-religionists in England. Alarmed by a perceived lapse in piety, they concluded that professing belief and leading a scandal free life were insufficient for full participation in the local assembly. To become communing participants,

"halfway members" were required to relate by testimony some personal experience of God's saving grace leading to conversion, thus affirming that they were, in their own opinion and that of the church, assured of salvation.[5] This requirement, expressed in the famous Halfway Covenant of 1662, was defended by such prominent churchmen as Increase and Cotton Mather and was readily embraced by Taylor, who became one of its most vocal advocates.[6]

"To modern eyes," noted Donald E. Stanford, the editor of Taylor's major writings, "Calvinism is a grim theology, and partly because of its grimness, partly because of its internal inconsistencies (man cannot save himself yet should exert every effort to lead a good life and achieve saving faith), the kind of Calvinism in which Taylor believed gradually broke down." [7] Though not for the most part identifiably sectarian, Taylor's poems nonetheless are marked by a robust spiritual content, characteristically conveyed by means of homely and vivid imagery derived from everyday Puritan surroundings. "Taylor transcended his frontier circumstances," biographer Grabo observed, "not by leaving them behind, but by transforming them into intellectual, aesthetic, and spiritual universals."

Study Questions

1. Write a close analysis of any of the poems from Preparatory Meditations. Identify the central metaphor or series of related metaphors and describe the process by which Taylor converts the terms of each metaphor into an assurance of his own salvation.
2. Discuss the title of Taylor's group of poems Preparatory Meditations. How does the title reflect his sense of the purpose of poetry?
3. Trace Taylor's use of objects from the natural world or of secular experience in *Upon Wedlock, and Death of Children*; *Upon a Wasp Chilled with Cold*; or *A Fig for Thee, Oh! Death* and examine the relationship in the poem between earthly life and spiritual salvation.
4. Discuss the extent to which Taylor's poetry reflects specific concepts of Puritan theology.
5. Edward Taylor's poetry displays the influence of English metaphysical poets. How valid is the view that Taylor's metaphors are too homely for sacred poetry, that their vividness and oddity distract

the reader from the poems' messages?

I am the Living Bread

Meditation 8 by Edward Taylor
John 6:51