



Bodies, Politics and Transformations: John Donne's Metempsychosis (Literary and Scientific Cultures of Early Modernity)

Siobhan Collins

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Throughout the twentieth century and since, critics have predominantly offered a negative evaluation of John Donne's Metempsychosis. In contrast, drawing on and contributing to recent scholarly work on the history of the body and on sexuality in the medieval and early modern periods, Siobhan Collins here situates Metempsychosis as a ludic text alert to and imbricated with the Elizabethan fascination with the processes and properties of transformation. This study places the poem's somatic representations of plants, beasts and humans within the context of early modern natural philosophy and medical, political and religious discourses of the period. It offers a far-reaching exploration of how Metempsychosis articulates philosophical inquiries that are central to early modern notions of self-identity and moral accountability, such as: the human capacity for autonomy; the place of the human in the 'great chain of being'; the relationship between cognition and embodiment, memory and selfhood; and the concept of wonder as a distinctly human phenomenon. Donne's Metempsychosis stages the oft-violent processes of change involved not just in the author's personal life but also in the intellectual, religious and political environment of his time. Collins re-evaluates Metempsychosis as a high point of Donne's poetic canon, using this genre-defying verse as a springboard to contribute significantly to our understanding of early modern concerns over the nature and borders of human identity and the notion of selfhood as mutable and in process. She contests the pervasive view that the work is incomplete, and illustrates how Metempsychosis is thematically linked with Donne's other work through its concern with the relationship between body and soul, and with transformation.

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