



Edward Taylor

(c.1642-1729)

Housewifery (c.1680s)

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 Reele  
And reele the yarn thereon Spun of thy Wheele.

Make me thy Loom 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 Varnisht 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.

## ANALYSIS

God is cast as a housewife.

The poem glorifies “housewifery” as divine. Taylor like Anne Bradstreet makes the home a potential heaven on earth, as the Victorians did over a century later. Contrary to the Feminist stereotype of the Puritan male as an overbearing patriarch in relation to his wife, Taylor goes so far as to feminize the God he worships. By subordinating himself to God in the conventional female role, making himself an instrument, he implicitly subordinates himself to his wife in the home, as Victorian husbands such as Hawthorne did in the 19th century.

“Housewifery,” or “Huswifery,” is an example of Taylor’s humble domestic imagery, his elevation of the common to the divine, his ecstatic tone and his Metaphysical style--his ingenious elaboration of a metaphor, called a “branching metaphor.” The spinning wheel was standard in Puritan homes and women manufactured nearly all the clothing in the villages of New England, keeping everyone decent and warm. Taylor’s “Holy robes,” the material garments he preached in, were probably made by local women, perhaps by his own two wives, who “Cloathd” him literally for glory, as God does spiritually in the poem.

Taylor makes spinning and clothing an allegory of his life in the service of God: “Make me, O Lord, thy Spinning Wheele compleat.” Thereafter, the completeness of his elaborated metaphor, accounting for all the major parts of a spinning wheel, seems to “prove” the truth they represent, as if by force of logical argument. The number of connected details woven into his allegory gives it a rhetorical authority, as if aesthetic wholeness equates with metaphysical truth. The spinning wheel becomes a numinous symbol of union with the divine as he surrenders his will to God, or the “Holy Spirit,” who operates the “wheel” of his being like a spinning wheel. The wheel is a mandala, a monadic symbol of wholeness, as exemplified by the Tibetan prayer wheel.

“Thy Holy Worde” is analogous to the distaff of a spinning wheel: a staff with a cleft end for holding wool or flax, from which the thread is drawn, much as spiritual Truth is drawn from the *Bible*. The flyers are a pair of arms that revolve around the bobbin to twist the yarn, like his “Affections” contribute to expressing divine Truth. “My Conversation” refers to his preaching, which is the reel containing the “yarn” or Truth that God spins through him. Quills are spools or spindles for the finished yarn, like his sermons. The Holy Spirit weaves all truths together in a coherent whole—“the Web”—which becomes his garment of salvation. Fulling mills clean and thicken cloth, just as following the ordinances of the Church purifies and strengthens his soul. The flowers of paradise are “Varnisht” because they will never wilt.

The last stanza lists faculties of the psyche as psychology was understood in the 17th century. All should be contained by the “garment” woven of spiritual truth, that his life may “shine” or glow as if haloed and that he may glorify God above all. The final couplet is an eloquent climax that evokes his ascent to the pulpit every Sunday: “Then mine apparell shall display before yee / That I am Cloathd in Holy robes for glory.”

Michael Hollister (2015)