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The Body as His Book: The Unification of Spirit and Flesh in John
Donne's *Holy Sonnets*

Senior Paper

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“T’our bodies turn we, then, that so
Weak men on love revealed may look;
Love’s mysteries in souls do grow,
But yet the body is his book” (69-72).

For John Donne, the spirit and the flesh are elements which are intrinsically linked. Here in his poem, “The Ecstasy,” for example, Donne presents an image of the mingling of body and soul between two lovers. Donne has spent seventeen stanzas of the poem demonstrating that love grows through the connecting of the souls, elaborating in painstaking detail the Neoplatonist¹ ideal of transcending the body through love. Here at the end, however, he finally shows that though love “in souls do grow” (71), it is ultimately written on the body, which is the book. Despite his interest in Neoplatonism, Donne asserts that spiritual ecstasy is incomplete without a physical basis. The couple becomes one entity as their souls combine, but this unification is impossible to obtain without the connection of their bodies. For Donne, love starts and ends with the body; it is what unites them. The spiritual connection only emerges from this physical one. Even the title of the poem, ecstasy, can be understood as a strong feeling of elation or a religious trance-like state. Donne playfully unites the differing meanings of ecstasy as he combines spiritual and sexual discourses between these lovers. Donne refuses to limit his understanding of

¹ Neoplatonism refers to the philosophical beliefs from a strand of Platonist philosophy. It is commonly study among religious philosophers, and Donne would have been familiar with the principles.

true ecstasy to either the body or the spirit; although a spiritual connection is vital to love, the body will always be Donne's book.

The 'subtle knot' of body and soul is central to understanding Donne, who persistently employs this religious language to explain the importance of his love. In "The Canonization," for example, Donne uses the religious concept of a holy canon, or recognized religious saints, as a metaphor to describe an amorous relationship: "And by those hymns, all shall approve / Us canonized for love" (35-6). As they are canonized because of their private love, they become sacred and obtain public acknowledgement of the highest form. This type of language also arises in "To His Mistress Going to Bed." In this poem, much like "The Ecstasy," Donne evokes Neoplatonist ideals as he explains that just as the soul must part from the body, the body must part from clothes: "Full nakedness, all joys are due to thee: / As souls unbodied, bodies unclothed must be" (34-6). In other words, Donne's speaker playfully uses philosophical language to convince a woman to sleep with him. He implores that "To enter in these bonds is to be free" (31), thus comparing nakedness to the Christian liberty discovered in the covenant of grace. In the wonder-filled verses of Donne's "The Good Morrow," he shows a relationship born from lust transcending to a spiritual union. If the lovers' souls are equally mixed, and their love true, Donne claims, "Love just alike in all, none of these loves can die" (21). These examples are only a small portion of Donne's work in which this imagery occurs, as he continuously relies on spiritual language to represent physical and relational intimacy.

This essay will focus on the reverse. Just as Donne's spiritual philosophy adds texture to his amatory verse, his persistent use of physical and sexual language also gives potency to his devotional poetry. His *Holy Sonnets*, written later in his life, address God in terms of physical longing much like a relationship to a mistress. Just as Donne views the body as his book in

relation to romantic love, his relationship to God begins on the same basis. Despite the various subjects and themes of his works, what lies at the epicenter of Donne's poetry is a central passion towards the subject, or as Achsah Guibbory notes, Donne's "devotional poems draw on the wit and passion of his love poetry" (212). Just as Donne's earlier poetry revealed his tendency to employ spiritual language to articulate his erotic desire, these sonnets use physical intimacy as a language to describe his relationship to God and to the church. In uncovering the depth of Donne's language, I will consider the cultural and theological contexts of his religious world and compare his sonnets to several scriptural and literary traditions. Careful attention to these scriptural and literary models reveals one of the primary functions of Donne's erotic language: the sensual imagery in the *Holy Sonnets* offers a powerful mode of expressing his spiritual longing and desired relationship with God.

Although Donne is a creative and idiosyncratic poet, his practice of combining physical love with spiritual ideas is part of a larger literary and theological tradition which emerges from the Bible itself. *Song of Songs* or *Song of Solomon* is a part of biblical canon unique for the way it celebrates sexual love, and it is a text with which Donne would have been intimately familiar. The *Song of Songs* begins boldly with excessive description to hyperbolize the eroticism, and it continues from there to build up the sensual imagery: "Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth: for thy love is better than wine" (1:1). Theologians of the medieval and early modern periods were forced to confront the potentially scandalous nature of this sexualized language and discover its place in biblical tradition. Gregory the Great, writing in the late sixth century, saw the song as an allegory for "the progress of the Christian soul in its contemplative quest for union with God and of the interactions between these two dimensions" (Turner 38). Gregory takes the sensual imagery seen in the *Song of Songs* and interprets it as the way to interact with God. As he

states in his *Exposition of the Song of Songs*, the language used in the song is an intentional connection to draw out love for God: “[God] goes so far as to use the language of our shameful loves in order to set our heart on fire with holy love ... we learn, from the words of this lower love, with what intensity we must burn with love of God” (qtd. Turner 218). Bernard of Clairvaux, writing later in the twelfth century, similarly saw the *Song of Songs* as a relation between God and the church; however, Bernard viewed erotic love as the perfect way to replicate spiritual love. As Denys Turner observes, Bernard sees the fusion of these two forms of longing as central to language: “for Bernard, human *eros* and spiritual significance are fused into a single literary totality in which the longing for beauty is in perfect harmony with the beauty of the longing itself” (166). In his writing on the song, Bernard draws a connection between the frequent references to breasts within the biblical text to the feeling of being filled with God’s love: “when we approach the altar our hearts are dry and lukewarm. But if we persevere, there comes an unexpected infusion of grace, our breast expands, as it were and our interior is filled with an overflowing love; and if someone were to press upon it then, this milk of sweet fecundity would gush forth in streaming richness” (qtd. Turner 131). As Turner explains with his analysis of different authors using this theme, it is a practice rooted in religious tradition: “the language of erotic love inherited from [these sources] is so deeply embedded in the way Christians talk about their relationship with their God as to have become the near universal, spontaneous and unselfconscious idiom of that relationship” (25). As these writers understood, this sexualized language is central to understanding and communicating a human relationship to the divine.

In the tradition of these theologians, William Baldwin, writing several decades before Donne was born, addressed the nature of the *Song of Songs* and created his own poem to celebrate it. Baldwin considered the relationship shown in the *Song of Songs* as one between God

and the church: “That thou mayste vnderstande this booke the better (Christen reader) thou shalte vnderstande that it is (as it wer) a dialoge betwene Christ and his churche, or as Origen calleth it, ye spousal song of Christ and his spouse: wherin there be fower singers” (1). Baldwin’s interpretation, that the *Song of Songs* details a relationship between God and his people through sexual imagery, is a common one. In the 1599 version of Geneva Bible, the opening annotation to verse one clearly states that the song is referring to “[t]he familiar talk and mystical communication of the spiritual love between Jesus Christ and his Church” (1:1). This biblical translation visibly points to an allegorical reading, in which the two lovers of the Song stand in for Christ and the Church, and Donne would have been intimately familiar with both the Geneva Bible and the King James Bible.² As we will see within Donne’s poetry, this interesting union of flesh and spirit is a longstanding tradition within Christian history as people attempted to describe their corporate as well as individual relationship to a divine being.

While the *Song of Songs* provided a tradition of sensual mixed with spiritual, the *Book of Psalms* similarly offered Donne a foundation and layout for his writings which sparked many of his themes. Donne frequently refers to the *Psalms* in his sermons and various writings, and in a sermon preached at Lincoln's Inn he states that “[God] gives us our instruction in cheerful forms . . . in Psalms, which is also a limited and a restrained form; not in an oration, not in prose, but in Psalms; which is such a form as is both curious, and requires diligence in the making, and then when it is made, can have nothing, no syllable taken from it, nor added to it: therefore is God's will delivered to us in Psalms” (*The Works* 309). Donne’s own poetic sense originates from this

² As Killeen points out, through observing Donne’s sermons we can see that “in the first years in the pulpit Donne had a preference for the Geneva, but that by the early 1920s he had shifted to the King James Bible” (569).

Psalmic tradition. In particular, Donne valued the translation of the *Psalms* created by Philip Sidney and his sister, commonly referred to as the Sidney-Pembroke Psalms: "Donne finds the inspiration and the art of Sydney-Pembroke psalms to be virtually on a par with the Psalmist's originals: the new psalms are (and Donne intimates that to be successful such works must be) not so much translations as re-revelations of God's Spirit" (Lewalski 275). Donne values the *Psalms* and the differing ways they can be interpreted. The *Psalms* served as a thematic and linguistic model for Donne as he wrote his *Holy Sonnets*. For example, in "Batter my heart" Donne continuously uses imperatives in his address to God, as is typical of the *Psalms*. Donne found in the *Psalms* a template he could use to express his own peculiar doubts, anxieties, and joys.

The tradition of the sonnet form, a love language of a different kind, was also vitally important to Donne's *Holy Sonnets*. Two leading forms of the sonnet, permeating the time when Donne was writing, were the Italian, or Petrarchan, sonnet and the English, or Shakespearean, sonnet. Petrarch's sonnet form was one which dominated the time in which Donne was writing his *Holy Sonnets*: "Francesco Petrarch the fourteenth-century Italian writer whose *Canzoniere* (also known as the *Rime sparse*) was the principal model for the sonnets written in England and on the continent in the sixteenth century" (Dubrow 27). Shakespeare is perhaps the most famous imitator of Petrarch among English writers of the period, using the basis of the Petrarchan sonnet and transforming it in several ways, such as addressing his "dark lady" and referencing other lovers who were heterodox: "The object of desire in Petrarchan love verse is female and usually, on the precedent of Petrarch's Laura, golden-haired. From the beginning of the 1609 Quarto, Shakespeare's speaker identifies a fair-haired young man, not a blonde woman, as the focus of his concern – thereafter, ambiguously, of his desire" (Cousins 134). There were other writers who employed and transformed the sonnet form in the way Shakespeare did such as Philip

Sidney, Edmund Spenser, Samuel Daniel, Sir Thomas Wyatt, and many more. In Sidney's *Astrophil and Stella* sonnet sequence, for example, the speaker ascribes to a Neoplatonic love and "rebutts the Petrarchan idealizations to which the poet apparently subscribed earlier" (Dubrow 40). Spenser also altered the traditional form by marrying the woman he was addressing in the sonnets; rather than saturating his *Amoretti* sonnet sequence with the usual feeling of unrequited love, Spenser creates a series of sonnets which celebrates their love and eventually ends in marriage (Bates 74). This time was characterized by these writers taking the form, using it, but also making new and distinctive uses of the sonnet style. It was a period of radical experimentation as these writers altered the way of thinking about a sonnet and expanded on its possibilities. Donne practices these same elements of experimentation with great fervor in his *Holy Sonnets*.

Donne takes the traditional sonnet form and alters its tone to represent his longing for God. A literary fad in the previous decade, sonnets were stereotypically used to address love for a woman. Although the first sonnet was addressed to God, the predominant form of the sonnet was one addressed to a lover: "Despite the fact that the earliest English sonnet sequence, Anne Lok's *Meditation*, was sacred rather than secular, the worldly love sonnet came to dominate the field in the late Elizabethan period. The religious sonnet, therefore, frequently assumes an oppositional cultural stance, defined by its difference from the prevailing fashion" (Wilcox, "Sacred Desire" 152-3). Donne participated in this tradition of writers who used this widely accepted lyric mode of romantic discourse and sublimated it into a spiritual discussion. As Helen Wilcox points out, these religious sonnets were perfectly tuned to fit into the same themes of longing and love: "The tensions inherent in this situation are perfectly matched by the sonnet form, with its capacity to contain the twists and turns of the human spirit – the 'buts' and 'yets'

of the lines above – within the confines of fourteen lines, the formal equivalent of the parameters of faith, love and judgement” (“Sacred Desire” 146). The sonnet form transitions well from sensual to spiritual domains, and the writers during this time played on this expectation. By using a mode commonly observed as belonging to courtly romance, these writers harnessed the sensual traditions from the *Song of Songs* through a romantic format.

Donne, therefore, falls into the category of these English writers who subverted the conventional practice of the sonnet. Unlike the other writers during this time who practiced secular sonnets, Donne adopts an antagonistic tone and imbues his passion in a distinct style: "Donne, on the other hand, is more adversarial in his Holy Sonnets and often prefers to address figures whom he sees as the enemy: ‘Death, be not proud’, he pugnaciously declares; or ‘Spit in my face you Jewes’, he taunts in his shockingly provocative reconstruction of the crucifixion scene." (Wilcox, “Sacred Desire” 148). Donne addresses God in provocative language and often assumes a commanding tone as one witnesses in the *Psalms*. In a complete distinction from traditional courtly love sonnets, Donne infuses a violent passion into his discourse with his God. Within both love for God and human love there is a desire for intimacy and a deeper spiritual connection. In this way, Donne approaches God from the place of a lover calling out to his muse. The same difficulties and frustrations from human love are inseparable from a relationship with a higher being. To instill this feeling of human love, Donne writes with symbols of typical love poetry: “his devotional poetry embraces this poetic form most closely associated with the Petrarchan tradition of earthly love” (Wilcox, “Devotional Writing” 150). As Fetzer describes, Donne’s language resonates with love poetry for the singular reason that the topic of the poem is unobtainable – he is begging for affection from an inaccessible force: “A male speaker’s communication with his desired female and a sinner’s address to God distinguish themselves by

a similar kind of ‘disequilibrium’ caused by the absence of unattainability of the desired object, whether female or divine” (150). This draws the connection between the presence, or absence, of the subject of the poems, and Donne’s desire to connect to it. God cannot be physically seen, yet Donne longs for an intimacy which rivals the connection between a lover and his mistress.

The impact of Martin Luther’s and John Calvin’s theological reforms, and the Protestant Reformation more generally, continued to influence the culture around Donne in the late 16th century (Stubbs 17). The essential theological variances between these religions are an essential part of understanding Donne’s *Holy Sonnets* because elements of their beliefs can be found in his works. Donne was born into a devout Catholic household, and this religious background played a large part in his theological and professional life. Although Donne would come to convert to Protestantism and renounce his Catholic upbringing, Catholic ideals and notions are still evident within his religious poetry: “the Catholic notes in Donne’s religious poems are remarkably clear and full. They are the work of a man who has renounced a religion to some manifestations of which he is still, at a profound level, attached” (Carey 37). Donne, after much debate and selfreflection, found both his faith and occupational prospects drawn towards Protestantism. Unlike the Roman Catholic Church which believed in both Christ and the church, namely the Pope and priests, as methods of salvation, Protestantism relied fully on salvation through Christ. Protestant theology declared human works insufficient for justification – or salvation – but instead relied wholly on divine grace. Donne was one of these early writers who was influenced by this Protestant mindset in his writing: "Donne is the first major English poet in the devotional mode whose lyrics are influenced by a distinctive Protestant poetics" (Lewalski 282). After Donne’s apostasy from the Roman Catholic Church, he became a member of the Church of England, which was especially influenced by the doctrine of John Calvin. There are several

Calvinistic notions rooted in Donne's writing, particularly the concept of total depravity and the sinfulness natural to every person. This belief is apparent in his sermon at St. Paul's Cross as he pronounced the ineluctable nature of sin: "There is in us a heart of sin, which must be cast up; for whilst the heart is under the habits of sin, we are not only sinful, but we are all sin, as it is truly said, that land overflowed with sea, is all sea" (Donne, *The Works* 109). In this sermon, Donne states that all humans are filled with sin, and the only hope is to "cast up" the sin and ask for God's grace. The *Holy Sonnets* in particular reflect many of the notions of Calvinism: "The sonnet sequence as a whole reflects the Calvinist sense of a man's utter helplessness in his corruption, and total dependence upon God in every phase of his spiritual life" (Lewalski 25). The process of coming to terms with one's faith, and one's sin, is a deeply intimate and personal aspect which Donne processes throughout his sonnets.

The tension seen in Donne's crisis of choosing a religious sect is prominent in his *Holy Sonnets*. The pressures between the idea of being saved through works or through God's grace are at the heart of Donne's verses:

Catholicism had offered a kind of spiritual stability, as the sacraments (baptism, marriage, communion) were a "means" of grace. Good works too could help ensure your salvation. But reformation theology insisted that individuals were saved by faith and God's grace alone. Though it was reassuring that God would do the work, the dark side of the emphasis on God's grace was that you could do nothing to save yourself, that in a sense you were helpless, as all depended on God (Guibbory 208).

The method observed in the sonnets is reflective of his Catholic upbringing, but they are deeply imbued with Calvinist notions of depravity and Protestant doubts and worries (Low 96). Through the *Holy Sonnets*, Donne struggles to understand how he should come to know God. They

represent a persistent worry about his sinfulness and his reliance upon a divine power and majesty to bring him redemption. This struggle opens the notion of the spirit and the flesh and why Donne relies on his physical form to come to know God. It is reflective of his own anxieties about how to understand a relationship to a divine being that he is unable to fully reach physically.

Donne's theology is central to understanding his *Holy Sonnets* and why they rely on the body and spirit to intermingle. Donne takes these paradoxes viewed throughout the sonnets from the dialect of the church and collides both the spiritual and the physical – the sacred and the sacrilege. The body, and physical intimacy, stands in as a representation of the inherent sinful nature of man. As salvation may be found for the spirit, the body serves as a vessel for sinful nature to enter. Donne, using this theological basis, interplays the connectedness of the spirit and flesh to manifest the total depravity of humans. As he shows with the sonnet "Batter my heart," he longs for a physical union with God that will wipe away his sinful self. Towards the middle of the sonnet, Donne personifies "Reason" as a being that is supposed to help him but has proven "weak or untrue" (8). Therefore, reason and intellectual thinking have proven useless for him in his pursuit of God. This information may explain why he is using passion to approach God rather than reason, and why he is relying on the body to reach a distinctly spiritual being. The flesh is also a distinct problem for Donne, as well as Neoplatonists and Calvinists, since it is the vessel through which sin enters; however, Donne also finds much of his joy and happiness through his flesh. This dichotomy serves as the basis of the tensions found in the *Holy Sonnets*. Even as the body is a reminder of his sinful nature, it is also how he finds fulfilling union with his wife, Anne Donne, and he seeks to combine this fulfillment in a relationship to his God. Donne sees the spiritual and physical as holding an unbreakable connection: one cannot exist without the other.

In this way, the tension between spirit and flesh is manifested in his works.

These frameworks all provide crucial contexts for reading Donne's poems and making the intriguing paradoxical interplay between body and soul come alive. The traditions which have been laid out above, the scriptural traditions from the *Song of Songs* which imbue religious context with sensual language, the Psalmist's model which serves as a thematic and linguistic format for Donne, the tradition of the sonnet form which has been playfully altered from its common romantic format into a spiritual context, and Protestant theology which includes the struggle of sin and reliance on divine grace, all serve a central purpose in unraveling Donne's sonnets. These traditions all provide critical contextual evidence for understanding how and why Donne combines spiritual and sensual language within his sonnets. While keeping these contexts in mind, I will focus on three of Donne's *Holy Sonnets* while thinking specifically about the overlap between body and flesh.

Donne participates in the allegorical traditions which came before him as he fuses the same sexual language in his fourteenth *Holy Sonnet*, "Batter my heart." In this sonnet, he combines the passion seen in the *Song of Songs* with a violent and unsatisfied tone, as Donne asks God to attack his heart and force him away from his evil ways. Embedded in the poem is a strong sense of violence and sexual conquest as represented by the final line: "Nor ever chaste except you ravish me" (14). This erotic undertone is focused entirely on God, and this tone helps to display Donne's own sense of reconciling the physical with the spiritual. The passive God that he is currently facing in his life is not one with whom he wishes to engage; he wishes for God to change into a being who can satisfy his earthly desires in a passionate way. This domineering point of view reflects the desperation of a lover begging for affection, and the language is infused with a sexual connotation. He declares his love for God, but he states that he is "betrothed unto

our enemy” (10). This choice of words points to a worldly picture of marriage, as he is stating that he is bonded intimately with God’s “enemy.” Donne is using the metaphor of marriage to describe a relationship which only exists in the spiritual sense. There is the implication that Donne has been unfaithful in his relationship to God. This infidelity takes on the form of an engagement, an adulterous metaphor. Using paradoxical statements, Donne states “Except you enthrall me, never shall be free” (13). The use of “enthrall” takes on sexual implications, as Donne says that he can never be free unless God enthralls, or mesmerizes, him. It is almost as if he is asking to be wooed or courted by his God. The implication of needing to serve God to achieve true freedom is also paralleled in one of Donne’s sermons preached at St. Paul’s Cross: “You cannot show your greatness more, than in serving God with part of it; you did serve before you were free; but here you do both at once, for his service is perfect freedom” (*The Works* 201). The final line of the sonnet takes this imagery, and paradox, to another level: “Nor ever chaste except you ravish me” (14). He makes the paradoxical statement that he can never be “chaste” unless he is “ravished” by God. This takes on a double entendre as the erotic connotations display the implication of being filled with God’s holy spirit as a parallel for physical intimacy. Throughout “Batter my heart” his verses are influenced by the scriptures, and these distinct comparisons show the nature of his thinking: “‘Batter my heart,’ possibly the most startling and distinctive of all Donne’s devotional sonnets, takes its sexual metaphors from the Song of Songs, and its language of destruction and renewal” (Wilcox, “Devotional Writing” 162). Donne uses the traditions laid out before him and transforms them to fit his own views of religion and God. Donne also provides his own original touch as he fuses the language with a strong sense of violence and unsatisfied desire.

Donne’s creative use of the sonnet form can also be seen in “Batter my heart.” As a

Petrarchan sonnet composed of fourteen lines, it utilizes three quatrains and a concluding couplet with a typical rhyme scheme. Donne, however, makes some alterations with the arrangement of the poem. Characteristically with a Petrarchan sonnet, the meter begins with an unstressed syllable followed by a stressed one. Donne, however, chooses to begin the poem with the word “Batter” (1). This word begins the sonnet with a powerfully stressed syllable. This trochaic substitution reflects the nature of the rest of the poem as the speaker is unusually aggressive and demanding. Donne is not satisfied with the simple “knock, breathe, shine and seek to mend” (2) on his heart that God had been doing thus far. Already this verse portrays itself in the same light as romantic poetry. Donne is pleading for a more profound and intimate connection than he has been granted. Sonnets of this kind are stereotypically used to address love for a woman, but Donne uses this form to bring out the same type of love for God. This sonnet both displays Donne’s use of metaphysical conceit and serves as an example for the dichotomy between spirit and flesh seen commonly in his poetry. Another of his *Holy Sonnets*, “Death, be not proud,” similarly manipulates the sonnet form by beginning with a trochaic substitution, “Death! be not proud, though some have called thee” (1). This parallel between the sonnets shows how it is typical for Donne to manipulate the form into his own style.

“Batter my heart” is a piece which presents Donne’s theology through violent and demanding language. The speaker describes a sense of complete failure to achieve any results through his own struggles, and he realizes that he must rely on God to change his nature. Donne begins by addressing God as the trinity, including Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit: “threepersoned God” (1). By asking God to “Batter” (1) his heart, he is asking for a forceful changing of his spirit. Donne uses the word “batter” similarly in his sermons as he likens prayers to God as means of “battering heaven”: “prayers is the way which God hath given us to batter

heaven” (*The Works* 78). Donne explains what he is looking for when he states, “That I may rise and stand, o’erthrow me and bend / Your force to break, blow, burn and make me new” (3-4). For Donne to “rise” and become “new” he feels that God must forcefully overthrow his current sinful nature. Though Donne is stating that God must force his way in, the very act of requesting this action from God makes it seem as if it would not actually be forced. Donne shows his current struggle to become intimate with God and failing. Donne states that he has labored to accept God already, but his attempts have been futile. This section of the sonnet also repeats the word “me” back to back: “in me, me should defend” (7). This repetition shows Donne’s current nature and emphasis on the self; he has been focusing only on his selfish desires, and now wants God to take control. Donne then returns to the violent imagery as he asks God to divorce him forcefully and break that knot “again” (11). The word choice of including “again” at the end of the line suggests an incident which has happened before in the past, perhaps repeatedly. As Lewalski suggests, the picture Donne creates in this sonnet reflects Calvinist notions: “The Calvinist sense of man’s utter helplessness in his corruption and total dependence upon God’s grace in every aspect of his spiritual life could hardly find more powerful and paradoxical expression than in this declaration that Christ can be liberator of the soul only by becoming its jailer, and can be its Bridegroom only by becoming its ravisher” (272). The true purpose of the poem presents itself in line four as Donne pleads with God to be violent with him in order to “make me new” (4). This phrase reflects the nature of his religion and the belief that God can absolve him and grant him peace. By claiming “Except you enthrall me, never shall be free” (13), Donne implies that the only freedom he can have is through being enslaved by God. This contradiction parallels the paradox of his faith, as he believes true salvation and freedom comes

from servitude to Christ. Rather than describing God in a picture of pure longing, he demands to be ravished and overthrown from his current state of being.

Donne's second *Holy Sonnet*, "As due by many titles," plays on the nature of being ravished in a parallel style. This sonnet confronts many paradoxes of Christianity and ends with Donne questioning God. He asks, "Why doth the devil then usurp in me? / Why doth he steal – nay, ravish – that's thy right?" (9-10), thereby questioning why Satan can "ravish" him when he is supposed to be created and owned by God. Just as he is betrothed to the enemy in "Batter my heart," Donne is being ravished by the enemy in this sonnet. He uses this sexual language to present his religious quandaries in a way that appeals to readers of amatory verse. To end the sonnet Donne states, "That thou lov'st mankind well, yet wilt not choose me, / And Satan hates me, yet is loath to lose me" (13-14). He wants God to choose him, to save him from this relationship with Satan, but he believes God is not intervening. Despite being owned by God, he does not feel as if he is being treated as God's possession. Donne uses this idea of being ravished, this sexual metaphor from the *Song of Songs* transformed into a violent image, to describe his daily struggles with his relationship to his God. Donne also used the word "ravished" in his seventeenth *Holy Sonnet* in which he wrote an elegy to his wife, Anne, after she passed away. In this sonnet Donne states, "And her soul early into heaven ravished" (3). This shows his repeated use of sexual imagery in relation to God.

Donne's "As due by many titles" uses the Italian sonnet form to present his soul as a woman being fought over by God and Satan. As the emotions heighten and his frustration becomes more apparent, the typical Italian rhyme scheme begins to change. Unlike the standard rhyme scheme in which the final couplet ends with a rhyme of its own, Donne makes the final three lines rhyme: "see" (12) "me" (13) and "me" (14). Donne adds his own personalization to

the form as he uses the rhyme structure to match his tone. The attitude throughout the poem is an accusatory one; rather than try to woo or persuade God of his worth, Donne's speaker blames God for not choosing him and lays out all the paradoxes of this allegation. A similar manipulation of the characteristic sonnet rhyme is seen in "Death, be not proud" as the rhyme scheme starts to fall apart towards the end. Donne maintains a typical Petrarchan rhyme pattern throughout the octave and the beginning of the sestet, but in the last three lines the rhyming stops altogether as he states, "And better than thy stroke: why swell'st thou then? / One short sleep past, we wake eternally, / And death shall be no more: Death, thou shalt die!" (10-14). Donne modifies the typical sonnet form as he breaks down the rhyme towards the end as death also dies.

In "As due by many titles" Donne presents an image of salvation through God alone, a conventional Protestant principle. At the beginning of the sonnet, Donne makes it clear that he feels as if he must declare himself, but he can only fumble through learned reasoning:

As due by many titles, I resign
 Myself to thee, O God: first, I was made
 By thee and for thee, and when I was decayed
 Thy blood brought that the which before was thine (1-4).

As the poem continues, Donne accepts the concept of receiving salvation through living a sinless life, only to find that he cannot live a life without sin: "Thy sheep, thine image, and, till I betrayed / Myself, a temple of thy spirit divine" (7-8). In his resulting emotions of frustration and desperation, he threatens and blames God for his misfortune. Although he wants God to choose him, he feels as if Satan is the only one seeking him out. Through "As due by many titles," Donne declares the impossibility of achieving salvation through works, thereby renouncing Catholic principles, and focuses on his total depravity. Donne does not receive an answer from

God, instead ending in the pessimistic note that God will “not choose me” (13). This particular sonnet is distinctive in the way it works through Donne’s beliefs. The sonnet breaks down from a rational speaker to a desperate plea for help.

In a similar violent fashion to “Batter my heart,” Donne’s eighteenth *Holy Sonnet*, “Show me, dear Christ,” creates an image of the intimate relationship between the church and the people. Donne plays on the idea of the Bride and Bridegroom by personifying the church into a state of being which is similarly sensual and violent to “Batter my heart.” Donne refers to the church throughout this poem as a feminine pronoun, thus consecrating the persona of the bridegroom. Throughout this sonnet he likens the church to a prostitute to symbolize the value of the church being open to all. Donne writes of the church being Christ’s “spouse,” and he describes it as being most pure when it is like an unfaithful wife and an amorous woman: “Betray, kind husband, thy Spouse to our sights, / And let mine am’rous soul court thy mild Dove” (11-12). Donne completes this metaphor as he states that the church “is most true and pleasing to thee then / When she's embraced and open to most men” (13-14). He shows that the truest church is one that is promiscuous and engages with many. This image of sexual promiscuity correlates to the demand to be ravished in “Batter my heart.” Donne takes these paradoxes from the dialect of the Church and collides both the spiritual and the physical – the sacred and the sacrilege. According to this poem, a true church is one that reflects the nature of a prostitute, a human occupation that is typically looked at as sinful, but Donne turns this understanding around. By being “open to most men,” the church becomes the perfect bride to Christ, as the church needs an open heart to all who enter. There are also many biblical allusions to loving a promiscuous woman, such as Hosea; God instructed Hosea to wed a prostitute and love her as He does His people: “Then said the Lord unto me, Go yet, love a woman beloved of

her friend, yet an adulteress, according to the love of the Lord toward the children of Israel, who look to other gods, and love flagons of wine” (1:2). Donne would have been intensely aware of these biblical tales and had them in mind while constructing his *Holy Sonnets*. Donne relies on the same sensual imagery of the *Song of Songs* and the biblical scholars and theologians who came before him.

“Show me, dear Christ” also plays with the arrangement of the sonnet by infusing the sonnet form with the image of a promiscuous woman representing the church. The church is on the receiving end of the sonnet’s form of earthly love. Donne questions the nature of the church throughout the poem, and he ultimately presents it as a being which should be shared and unrestrained. Playing on the nature of courtly romance, Donne compares the church’s inhabitants to knights seeking a love: “Dwells she with us, or, like advent’ring knights, / First travel we to seek, and then make love?” (9-10). This pursuit of the church reflects the medieval romance in the sense that the knight must seek out the woman. The volta, or turning point, of the sonnet occurs in the eleventh line of “Show me, dear Christ” rather than the usual ninth line, as Donne stops asking questions and states “Betray, kind husband, thy Spouse to our sights” (11). Therefore, Donne employs the sonnet form throughout the piece to present an image of the church as a feminine being who is wooed by several suitors. By comparing the church to an amorous woman, Donne creates a similar contrast to the persuasive nature of romantic poetry.

Through “Show me, dear Christ” Donne uses metaphors from the language of the church as tools to ironically display the nature of his religion. He references Roman Catholicism which “on the other shore / Goes richly painted” (2-3) and Protestantism which “Laments and mourns in Germany and here” (4) in order to display the various rivals of Christ’s affections. This beginning sets up the opposing branches of the church, and it starts to show the favorable

promiscuous behavior that is elaborated on in the rest of the poem. He begins the verse with a search for the true church, the church most promising to God. As Lewalski notes, Donne combines the notion of the church as Christ's bride with the opposing image to show how the church should behave: "Surely no one but Donne would so wittingly seem to confuse the Bride with her antithesis in Revelation, the Great Whore of Babylon (Rev. 17:4-18), playing upon the contemporary Protestant term of opprobrium for Rome to point up the essential spiritual qualities God's church must display" (274). This shocking language serves its purpose as Donne establishes his opinion on the nature of organizations. Through the use of biblical images and erotic language, Donne sets up a paradox of a true yet adulterous church. There is debate about the publication date of "Show me, dear Christ," as there are many elements which connect this sonnet to Donne's *Satyre 3* in the 1590s. *Satyre 3* uses similar language by giving the church feminine features and serves to "seek true religion" (43). This distinction is important to note because during that time Donne had not yet accepted the Church of England, and he, therefore, was seeking to understand what the true church looked like for himself (Robbins 463). Rather than taking "Show me, dear Christ" as an apology for the Church of England, it can be read as an attempt to make sense of the religious debates happening frequently during this time. Donne takes these templates laid out before him and transforms them to fit his own style. Taking part in these traditions from the *Song of Songs*, the sonnet form, and the theological disputes from his time does not take away from his originality, but it enhances the meaning behind his verses. He is using these poems to truly proclaim his faith and his desires for a more intimate relationship to God.

It is not until later that Donne was recognized for being a part of a movement of poets regarded as Metaphysical poets. Being a part of this group gave Donne the implication of being a

philosophical writer, but “he seldom writes from a purely philosophical impulse. What he constantly does, however, is use philosophical imagery to illustrate and define his emotional and intellectual adventures” (Willey 361). Despite now being associated with this group, Donne would not have considered himself a Metaphysical poet. Although his poetry does focus on the same transcendent quality, he is also grounded in the physical world. Underneath his devotional pieces to God are the workings of romantic seduction and appeals seen in his earlier verses: “Indeed, he was not above addressing God Himself in tones of ‘immoderate desire,’ variously adopting the postures of demand, seduction, desperation, fidelity, and abjection in his poetic prayers” (Saunders 1). Whether reading his satire, love lyrics, religious devotions, or sermons, Donne maintains a constant passion directed at the focus of his musings. Be it a woman he is in love with or a God that he desperately wants to connect with, Donne’s verses overflow with passion. As Fetzer states, this is what connects the differing subjects of his poetry: “Passion constitutes the most striking connection between Donne’s religiously erotic poetry and his erotically religious verse” (150). This passion often presents itself in a violent fashion as he struggles to exert his desires onto the page. As seen in his *Holy Sonnets*, passion is central to understanding and connecting to his God. This passion may derive, in part, from the Christian perspective of the passion of Christ. As Christ’s ultimate show of love was his death on the cross, so too Donne uses violent passion to represent his love to God. He uses both forceful and submissive language in his exhortation to God; he appears as a lover both demanding and pleading for a response from the object of his affections.

Although Donne functions as a part of these scriptural and literary traditions which came before him, he fuses his own distinct personality and witty paradoxes into his writing, or as Lewaski eloquently states, "Donne's very creative ideas about imitating the magnificent poetry of

the scriptures extends to his relationship with the biblical poets: he is bound to no single model, he presents himself as correlative type with various of these poets as occasional dictates, and his stance is not so much that of imitation as of accomplishing a new work in the same spirit" (245). While using the traditions from the *Song of Songs*, *Psalms*, and the sonnet form, Donne infused his own creative spirit in the process. He took these traditions, altered them to fit his distinct style, and discussed the theological issues which interested him. In Donne's *Holy Sonnets*, he used sensual language as a method to describe his spiritual longing and relationship to his God. His physical and spiritual existence are consistently at odds with one another as he approaches God; however, the only way Donne seems able to find any real relationship with God is through this physical language. His choice to include the word "again" in "Batter my heart" gives the inference that breaching this gap is a constant struggle throughout his life. His *Holy Sonnets*, therefore, are part of the way he fuses the physical and spiritual in his attempt to connect with God. The melding of the spiritual and the physical, erotic and devotional, are paradoxes which mark Donne's poetry as peculiarly his own.

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