

**The Confrontation and Reconciliation of Eros and Caritas in the Poetry of  
John Donne:**

**A Life and Works Study**

**By**

**Emily E. Bajorek**

**A thesis presented for the B.A. Degree**

**With Honors in**

**The Department of English**

**University of Michigan**

**Spring 2006**

© 2006 by Emily Eileen Bajorek

To God without Whom I would be nothing, and also;

To my father, who allowed me to 'live for art,' whether that meant Sunday mornings at Brunch with Bach at the Detroit Institute of Arts, or buying me every book that I ever wanted to read, and who told me that every day of our lives lay before us like a blanket of snow, and every step we take is recorded for the world to see.

To my mother, who read me my first book (often 16 times in one sitting—due to my insistence,) and seldom lost patience with my love for the written word. Thank you for putting your life on hold to give me the best possible childhood.

## Acknowledgements

It occurs to me that I am far too indebted to too many people to include all of them here in a manner that is satisfactory. However, my thesis would not have taken its current form at all if it were not for the patient and never condescending guidance of my thesis adviser, Dr. Michael Schoenfeldt who always asked me to “push on that idea,” and who showed me things about myself that I never knew. For that I am thankful. The most notable revelation was the fact that I spoke of Donne's exile from polite society (due to his unfortunate alliance with Anne More) and my own life experience in much the same terms. This knowledge provided me with a point of entry into the texts more personal than mere scholarly objectivity. The project became one of analysis *and* introspection, and I believe it is better for that fact.

I must also acknowledge my love, who with gentle words offered me encouragement and who was always confident in my abilities, Dr. James DeLater. Without him, I fear I would have given up on myself far before the Ides of March. His knowledge of Renaissance history and literature of the period is *nonpareil*. I was (and am) lucky beyond all measure to have the benefit of his experience and compassion when I was without sleep, without coffee, and on my last thread of sanity in the writing of this thesis.

I thank the Wagner Bursary for its very generous support which allowed me to attend the John Donne Society conference in February. It was an experience I will never forget. It is impossible to estimate the value of having been able to engage myself in discussions with the critics and scholars that I had been reading, and to be able to immerse myself in three days of discussion and talks which helped me to refine my thesis.

I thank my friends in the English Honors program, who let me sound ridiculous from

time to time, and who did not mind that my enthusiasm for Donne was perhaps abnormal. I thank Scotti Parrish for her helpful observations, and unwavering interest. I thank John Whittier-Ferguson for his touch of the realistic when I, or my project, flew too far away into space.

I would also like to thank my parents, David and Barbara Bajorek, my brother (and friend) Benjamin, and my grandmother Ilene Gutowski. Without my father's lifelong encouragement, my mother's faith in me, my brother's tech support, and my grandmother's prayers, this thesis could not have been a reality.

## Abstract

This thesis explores the problems of Eros and Caritas in John Donne's Songs and Sonnets and Holy Sonnets. Donne places Eros and Caritas in conflict to achieve what may be the most consistently inconsistent exploration into topics of physical and spiritual love. In this thesis, we will look at three ways in which he struggles with love and lust in both a human and Christian context. In addition, we will take a look at how the author's works and perceptions of Love evolve over the course of his career, and how his experiences with his wife, Anne More Donne, may have influenced his poetry.

In Chapter One, we shall look to the motif of Immortality of Love and Martyrdom for Love in the poems "The Relic," "The Valediction of the Book," and "The Canonization." In these poems, Donne dignifies human love by placing it in the context of eternity. Earthly lovers achieve immortality and attain the status of martyrs through the power of appearances, history, and poetry.

In Chapter Two, we shall examine the figure of Alternate Space in the poems "The Sunne Rising," "The Good Morrow," and "The Extasie." In these poems, Donne manipulates spatial constructs to give earthly lovers a preferred place in world and the cosmos, and provides them a place where the world will "let them love."

In Chapter Three, we shall look at Sacramental Sexuality as a bridge between Eros and Caritas. By describing sexuality in sacramental terms, Donne equates the sacrament of marriage with sex in "The Flea," and rape with penance in "Batter my Heart." We will also treat the ever problematic "Since She Whom I Lov'd," which, more than any other poem, agonizes over the implications of attachment to the erotic in the face of the holiest love of all, that of God.

## CONTENTS

|  |    |
|--|----|
| Extreme and Scatt'ring Bright: A Prelude               | 1  |
| Chapter 1: Immortality for Love and Martyrdom for Love | 9  |
| Chapter 2: Alternate Spaces                            | 22 |
| Chapter 3: Sacramental Sexuality                       | 37 |
| A Conclusion   | 52 |
| Works Consulted  | 53 |

**Extreme and Scatt'ring Bright:**

**A Prelude**



Donne is a poet of extremes. The relationships delineated in his love poetry attest to this fact. We are treated to various attitudes and perspectives from misogyny to the worship of woman, from desperation to patience, from rough passion to tenderness. But above all these, in the background, like the Gemini twins of myth, are Eros and Caritas, the place from which all of these textual tensions come. They do not stand idle; indeed, they are deeply involved with both the text and one another, and are not always the most harmonious of siblings. From their struggle comes what may be considered the most intellectual, conflicted, confrontational love poetry ever written--and with good reason. In his Songs and Sonnets and Holy Sonnets, John Donne attempts to find what has eluded much of humanity since its infancy, that is, the perfect balance of Eros (love of the flesh and physical gratification), and Caritas (often Christian love, or brotherly love, but also the neo-platonic ideal). Donne's analytical mind cannot take the definition or even the concept of love for granted. Rather, he presses common conceptions of love to their limits, distorting the picture so as to put it into clearer relief. Often it is not sufficient to push Eros to the point of purely sexual gratification (as "Communitie"), nor it is not sufficient to push the ideals of neo-platonic love to the point of becoming disembodied (as "Valediction Forbidding Mourning"). Donne puts the two types of love in conversation, or even into conflict, to achieve what may be the most consistently inconsistent exploration into topics of physical and spiritual love.

If one is interested in the life and works of John Donne, one can hardly avoid following him into the discussion on Eros and Caritas. As a courtier, one can assume that he was quite adept at romantic flattery. As a student at the Inns of Court, he demonstrated his skill in terms of argumentation as well as conquest and erotic self-satisfaction. As a husband, he discussed what it means to love both purely and passionately, and as a minister he explored the problems of the

coexistence of human love and the love of God, often using imagery that inextricably links the two. Since Donne lived a life so defined by sentiments of love in its variant and often conflicting forms, it is important in understanding Donne that we not neglect the erotic and the neo-platonic veins that trace their way through Donne's corpus.

For this reason, I have always found it odd that many critics address one aspect of love or the other, but seldom the two together. When they *are* mentioned together it is by way of contrast. This does not go far enough. For me, the fact that they contrast is not as important to our understanding of the text as the fact that out of the contrast between Eros and Caritas comes a gloriously inventive and often revealing compromise. These are moments of insight that never fail to provoke, and they can provide the reader with a deeper and more satisfying understanding of the author at his best. Argumentation was Donne's forte. If one were to ask the average person to explain how love and lust can and must be harmonious, they might look at you in confusion, yet this is the same question that John Donne poses in some of his most rhetorically effective poetry.

This occasional confrontation of Eros and Caritas need not be hermetically sealed within the text, for it is not without a corollary in the life of the poet himself. We are given the opportunity to see the author's works and perceptions of Love evolve over the course of his career. It is a matter much contested in the literary community which works may be attributed to Donne's early, middle, and late periods, and some argue that such designations are impossible to make. With a certain amount of caution, however, I find it not only acceptable but desirable to note certain trends in the perspectives and argumentative positions taken by Donne and his narrators. To allow for such designation and categorization of these trends (with some overlap of genre and subject matter) is to give one a framework in which one can explore Donne's

development of argument and perspective, insofar as they pertain to love over time. In such a way, one can approach the corpus of Donne's poetry as dynamic, and engaged with itself on a variety of levels. The body of poetry becomes as a mind at work.

Though we cannot assign a precise chronology to Donne's works, the designations of early, middle and late works can be helpful in discussing the relative maturity of the poems' narrators. His early narrators, for example, were more often than not incurable flirts, social climbers, and conquerors of women whether blonde, brunette, short, or tall (e.g., in "The Indifferent"). These early poems relish the pleasures of the flesh and the erotic. In his late and more sober works, which most often took the form of sermons, Donne is completely preoccupied with the love that can be attributed to God, in other words, Caritas. Even though one cannot be certain that Donne did not compose erotic poetry during this time, if such poems exist, they have not been handed down to us. It is also possible that one of his posthumous editors did not want to ruin Donne's reputation as a first-class preacher by including his more "irresponsible" poems alongside his sermons.

But in his intermediary works, the conceptions and natures of Eros and Caritas are worked out in the space between the epicurean and the ascetic. The two forms of love are pitted against one another; they argue; they compromise. This time in Donne's career exhibits a well-considered transition, a moment of exploration in the way of poetical conceits, and also in what it means to love and be loved in a fallen world. In many ways we can see this period as a maturation and tempering of Donne's earlier erotic works (marked by "irresponsible" narration,) and the predecessor to his greatest spiritual treatises and sermons filled with the glorification of Caritas. From this period of mediation between the two extremes of excess and sobriety we can gaze into the mind of Donne as he works with the particular problems of Eros and Caritas. We

may also gain a greater appreciation for the intellectual discourse that took place which caused Donne to evolve, or perhaps reflected his evolution, from a fulsome and lascivious young courtier to the austere minister delivering the message that "God is love."

Donne's life was decidedly changed by love. He enjoyed a life of decent prosperity and good fortune (after converting to the Church of England) until he chose to submit to his more erotic desires and to push reason aside for the woman he loved, Anne More. After they were married, Donne had been effectively cut off from polite society; he transgressed a major law of both the country and of commonly held codes of decency. He married a woman without asking for her father's consent, robbing him of his property, as she undoubtedly was perceived. She was only seventeen when they married, and by the accounts that we have of her, remained devoted and faithful to her husband through the trials and tribulations that resulted from his disgrace. Is it then mere coincidence that much of his love poetry is defensive of the (or perhaps a) couple who wish to control everything and everyone around them, or to push them all away to create a room in which they can love unbothered by the world? Is it defensiveness, and the desire to justify such a relationship that he expresses in the great poems "The Canonization," "The Sunne Rising," "The Good Morrow," etc? Is it the same impulse that gives us the secretive and hermetic poems such as "A Valediction Forbidding Mourning," and "The Undertaking," which glorify the discretion of a couple loving one another without allowing the world to see? Can it be the same instinct for justification that prompted Donne to write some of his most heretical poetry holding sexual congress as the ethical equal to sanctioned marriage in "The Flea?" These questions are entirely justified, for how could an event as life-altering as Donne's decision to marry Anne More not affect his poetry in some way? Even so, it is not appropriate to reduce the explanation of his poetry to this single incident because it denies the ability of a poet to imagine

beyond his own experience. We certainly know that if Donne was anything, he was imaginative. Let us, then, approach this subject with an inquiry informed by biography, but not determined by biography.

One of the poems that display the strife and compromise of Eros and Caritas in its greatest relief is "Air and Angels." Here, a lover struggles with the feasibility of adhering to one school of love over the other, for they both present problems with which the speaker is unsatisfied. His first impulse, upon seeing his beloved, is to regard her as a platonic ideal. He is in love with the idea of her before being acquainted with her body. She is as an angel, affecting him without physical presence, and his worship is natural and good. When the speaker says:

To where thou wert I came,

Some lovely glorious nothing I did see, (ll. 5-6)

he does not see her physical form, but rather, is still deeply attached to the *idea* of her loveliness. Soon, the speaker realizes that love cannot be actual if the lovers do not have physical forms, since they are human. The soul needs body to fulfill its purpose, as does love need body. The speaker then pleads with Love to assume his lover's form, that she may have physical presence; Love tempers her ethereal being with substance in much the same way that air gives shape to angels. Oddly, and on cue, Love readily complies with his wishes, as if the speaker has the power to command Love to bestow form upon his beloved. Does air, or Love for that matter, have its own mind? Can it, of its own volition, create reality out of ideals? These lines suggest that Love can, and the lover, as an extension, inherits the same power. Love shapes the beloved's face, since beauty (as it has often been said) is in the eye of the beholder, but Love does not stop there, and neither do the attentions of the lover. The first stanza shows the fact that the platonic ideal, the purest form of Caritas, cannot be feasible as a lasting state of relations, as love must

have form to be effectual.

The speaker's attentions become engaged with his lover's physical reality, and as his beloved's body takes shape he finds himself obsessed with the smallest features of her appearance. His ideal is not vindicated, but rather, overshadowed, for her form has "wares which would sinke admiration" (l. 17). He becomes obsessed with every detail of her body, convinced that perhaps he has made a mistake in his demand that she be given physical presence. Every hair on her head becomes a distraction from her essence, her ethereal existence. So, the speaker, exasperated, judges that "some fitter must be sought" (l. 20), that is, there must be a third option that is more agreeable than being in love with an ideal nothing, and giving oneself over to distractions of the flesh. He proclaims:

For, nor in nothing, nor in things

Extreme, and scatt'ring bright, can love inhere. (ll. 21-22)

The extremes, of course, are lofty Caritas, platonic love, which looks upon physical manifestation as a degradation, and the body-centered erotic obsessions which utterly deny the value of that which first attracted them.

In the compromise, the metaphor comes full circle, the image of the angel, with face and wings of air, hearkens back to the beloved's lip, eye and brow which the speaker gave shape through the agency of Love. The embodied angel becomes the emblem of human romantic aspiration, as indeed the angel was sometimes considered the epitome of sensual love.<sup>1</sup> The angel uses air to form itself in physical planes of existence, but an angel deigns to do so, being purer of

---

<sup>1</sup> One moment that springs to mind is Raphael's explanation of angelic sexuality to Adam in Milton's *Paradise Lost*. According to Raphael, intimacy for angels is as easy as "air" with "air." Ch. 9 ll. 626-629

essence (since an angel is spirit), than air, which is an element<sup>2</sup>. The effect in the poem is one of necessity. The speaker's love, by necessity needs object and embodiment, else it is as ineffectual as an angel without form, or as air without purpose. His love finds its object and its embodiment in the silent woman of the poem. She is the sphere, the form that his love must take to gain actuality; therefore his love only has capacity to be actual if her love can give it form and expression. She literally *is* his love in physical reality. The strength and scope of physical and spiritual their loves must be the same; it must have correctness of proportion or it cannot hold.

There is a great dependence between air and angels to give each other purpose, shape, and expression; angels cannot have form without air, and air gives angels form. Likewise, woman gives man's love form and shape. At least in part, she is given a physical reality by his love, by deigning to receive him. His love gains purpose and manifests itself in the entity of his beloved. It is the closest union imaginable. The two apart, like air and angels, cannot affect great things, but together they are the perfect mediation between Earth and heaven.

---

<sup>2</sup> Tillyard, in his Elizabethan World Picture, poses the question of the nature of the air of which angels are said to be made. He claims that there are many possibilities of interpretation. One: that air that angels use to assume form is a purer kind of the air that we breathe, but the same in essence, and is an element. Two: that the air is an ether, a fifth element, exalted of the other elements.

**Immortality of Love and Martyrdom for Love:**

**Chapter 1**



If the progress of love is impeded by difficulties, one can look to the future for hope. Especially if the lovers' bond becomes threatened, it is tempting to count on better times in this life, or in the next. We know that in John Donne's life, he experienced near worldly ruin because of his love for Anne; the impulse to hope for a more forgiving future in the face of present tyranny must have been a strong one. In succumbing to this impulse to replace a troubled present with a more hopeful future, John Donne uses the idea of immortality of love, and martyrdom for love to project the moment of fulfillment from the present to the future. For example, in "The Valediction of the Book" his poetry is the means by which the couple will be remembered and revered in the future. In such a way, his poems address the issue of a love thwarted during the present and offer it a way to obtain dignity in the future. In doing so, he lends earthly love an aura of permanence and sacredness.

What does it mean to say that lovers are immortal? How does portraying the role of the lover as a martyr dignify earthly love? The first claim recognizes the ability of the couple to gain eternal existence in their own minds and to demand the recognition of humanity. The second claim presupposes a belief in the Christian God and in the afterlife associated with the Christian tradition that cannot be separated from that context. In his work on Donne's poetry of this period, Edmund Gosse writes: "His transcendental fancy, however, might thus see in the conjointure of Anne and himself a microcosm of the eternal," while "in the eyes of the world they cut a meagre and impoverished figure" (Gosse 118). Gosse speaks in reference to "The Canonization" which along with "The Relique," and "The Valediction of the Book," illustrates the same impulse to transcendence amid disapproval and hostility.

The love poem, "The Relic," focuses on immortality of the human sentiment. It is at once a poem of purity of intention and actions, and of the sensual (though perhaps not sexual)

relationship between a man and his lover. The poem begins with a vision of a cemetery where a future grave digger dares to disturb the final resting place of a lover. There comes an image of bright (perhaps blonde) hair about the arm of the poem's narrator. Donne seems so partial to the motif of the "bracelet of bright hair about the bone" that he returns to the image four times in his elegies and poems. For the narrator of "The Relic," the hair recalls the widespread Christian myth that on judgment day, souls would have to travel about the world to collect any pieces of their body that they may have lost (such as hair, or nails) in order to face eternal Judgment fully embodied. The two souls of "The Relic"

thought that this device might be some way  
 To make their souls, at the last busy day,  
 Meet at this grave, and make a little stay? (ll. 9-11)

Their determination to see each other once again after death is profound, for they manipulate the preordained sequence of events on judgment day by "cheating" the system. She must return to the grave to retrieve her hair. In such a way, the narrator finds a way to conquer death and to prove their love is as immortal as their souls or bodies.

The disturbance of his grave is inevitable, for in the next stanza Donne begins,

If this fall in a time, or land  
 Where mis-devotion doth command (ll. 12-13)

he assumes the grave will be disturbed, and the state of the world around him. He remains unchanged, as does his love, but when Donne writes,

Then, he that digs us up, will bring  
 Us, to the Bishop, and the King,  
 To make us relics (ll. 13-15)

we learn that in the future, people have become superstitious. They have also forgotten even the most basic tenets of Christianity because

Thou [his lover] shalt be a Mary Magdalen, and I

A something else thereby; (ll. 17-18)

suggesting that the narrator is, according to the apocryphal myth, Jesus Christ, and therefore, the lover of Mary Magdalen. The poor superstitious peasants seem to have forgotten that Jesus Christ does not rest in an earthly grave, but rather ascended into heaven. On the other hand, the narrator could also be one of Mary's "customers," for it was commonly thought that Mary was a practitioner of the world's oldest occupation. As a result, the imagery (regardless of how one chooses to interpret the "something else thereby") is tinged by the erotic.

Though having conquered death, the lovers plan to meet at the grave on judgment day, (and we will soon learn that they were a miraculously pure couple,) the world can only see and revere the apparently sensual aspect of their relationship. Calling one's lady a famous prostitute, and oneself her most famous customer/lover and then being so certain of future admiration is a very strange idea. Perhaps to inform appearances of erotic intimacy by reality, the narrator deems it necessary to offer his poem as a guide to correct love. Though it may seem that the couple is identified by their erotic relationship, "Donne" insists that there is more to them, and seeks to correct the "mis-devotions" directed at them when he writes:

I would have that age by this paper taught

What miracles we harmless lovers wrought (ll. 21-22).

What are these miracles? The lovers

loved well and faithfully,

Yet knew not what we loved, nor why,

Difference of sex no more we knew,  
 Than our Guardian Angels do (ll. 23-26)

It is a statement of the truest form of Caritas, that which knows neither sex nor physicality. The lovers did not even love one another's embodied forms, but loved the idealized soul within each other. It is an extreme notion on its own, but compared with the image of the previous stanza left in our minds of the physicality and eroticism between Mary Magdalen and her lover, is rather shocking. The reality behind the image (if we are to trust the narrator in his insistence on the purity of the relationship) is entirely contrary to one's first impression of a lusty, earthy couple. Yet this miracle allows the reader to more readily accept that so many people worship the couple instinctively. Though the erotic appearance of the couple may be shocking, Donne insists that one must allow for the existence of everyday miracles and the dignity of a true propriety not accountable to appearances. Although the couple appears scandalous, there is still an underlying virtue apparent to those (the simple women, and some men, who have turned to superstition [l. 17]) who are receptive to it. The underlying virtue acts as a model for future lovers to follow.

Lovers hoping for future appreciation and for a level of immortality are themes that resurface in a more carefully fleshed out incarnation of "A Valediction: Of the Booke." The valediction begins with an imperative as a man tells his lady what she must do so that they may obtain immortality and become an eternal example to lovers. He tells her that she will "anger destiny, as she doth [them]" (l. 2) by keeping the record of their love affair as a testimony to later generations of lovers, lawyers, and statesmen that at one time true love existed, and that he and his lover are both actors and writers of the greatest love story ever told. The "letters, which have past twixt thee and mee" (l. 11) are to be composed into "Annals" (l. 12) which are compared to the Bible, but whose authority is perhaps even more incontrovertible.

relationship between a man and his lover. The poem begins with a vision of a cemetery where a future grave digger dares to disturb the final resting place of a lover. There comes an image of bright (perhaps blonde) hair about the arm of the poem's narrator. Donne seems so partial to the motif of the "bracelet of bright hair about the bone" that he returns to the image four times in his elegies and poems. For the narrator of "The Relic," the hair recalls the widespread Christian myth that on judgment day, souls would have to travel about the world to collect any pieces of their body that they may have lost (such as hair, or nails) in order to face eternal Judgment fully embodied. The two souls of "The Relic"

thought that this device might be some way

To make their souls, at the last busy day,

Meet at this grave, and make a little stay? (ll. 9-11)

Their determination to see each other once again after death is profound, for they manipulate the preordained sequence of events on judgment day by "cheating" the system. She must return to the grave to retrieve her hair. In such a way, the narrator finds a way to conquer death and to prove their love is as immortal as their souls or bodies.

The disturbance of his grave is inevitable, for in the next stanza Donne begins,

If this fall in a time, or land

Where mis-devotion doth command (ll. 12-13)

he assumes the grave will be disturbed, and the state of the world around him. He remains unchanged, as does his love, but when Donne writes,

Then, he that digs us up, will bring

Us, to the Bishop, and the King,

To make us relics (ll. 13-15)

we learn that in the future, people have become superstitious. They have also forgotten even the most basic tenets of Christianity because

Thou [his lover] shalt be a Mary Magdalen, and I

A something else thereby; (ll. 17-18)

suggesting that the narrator is, according to the apocryphal myth, Jesus Christ, and therefore, the lover of Mary Magdalen. The poor superstitious peasants seem to have forgotten that Jesus Christ does not rest in an earthly grave, but rather ascended into heaven. On the other hand, the narrator could also be one of Mary's "customers," for it was commonly thought that Mary was a practitioner of the world's oldest occupation. As a result, the imagery (regardless of how one chooses to interpret the "something else thereby") is tinged by the erotic.

Though having conquered death, the lovers plan to meet at the grave on judgment day, (and we will soon learn that they were a miraculously pure couple,) the world can only see and revere the apparently sensual aspect of their relationship. Calling one's lady a famous prostitute, and oneself her most famous customer/lover and then being so certain of future admiration is a very strange idea. Perhaps to inform appearances of erotic intimacy by reality, the narrator deems it necessary to offer his poem as a guide to correct love. Though it may seem that the couple is identified by their erotic relationship, "Donne" insists that there is more to them, and seeks to correct the "mis-devotions" directed at them when he writes:

I would have that age by this paper taught

What miracles we harmless lovers wrought (ll. 21-22).

What are these miracles? The lovers

loved well and faithfully,

Yet knew not what we loved, nor why,

Difference of sex no more we knew,  
 Than our Guardian Angels do (ll. 23-26)

It is a statement of the truest form of Caritas, that which knows neither sex nor physicality. The lovers did not even love one another's embodied forms, but loved the idealized soul within each other. It is an extreme notion on its own, but compared with the image of the previous stanza left in our minds of the physicality and eroticism between Mary Magdalen and her lover, is rather shocking. The reality behind the image (if we are to trust the narrator in his insistence on the purity of the relationship) is entirely contrary to one's first impression of a lusty, earthy couple. Yet this miracle allows the reader to more readily accept that so many people worship the couple instinctively. Though the erotic appearance of the couple may be shocking, Donne insists that one must allow for the existence of everyday miracles and the dignity of a true propriety not accountable to appearances. Although the couple appears scandalous, there is still an underlying virtue apparent to those (the simple women, and some men, who have turned to superstition [l. 17]) who are receptive to it. The underlying virtue acts as a model for future lovers to follow.

Lovers hoping for future appreciation and for a level of immortality are themes that resurface in a more carefully fleshed out incarnation of "A Valediction: Of the Booke." The valediction begins with an imperative as a man tells his lady what she must do so that they may obtain immortality and become an eternal example to lovers. He tells her that she will "anger destiny, as she doth [them]" (l. 2) by keeping the record of their love affair as a testimony to later generations of lovers, lawyers, and statesmen that at one time true love existed, and that he and his lover are both actors and writers of the greatest love story ever told. The "letters, which have past twixt thee and mee" (l. 11) are to be composed into "Annals" (l. 12) which are compared to the Bible, but whose authority is perhaps even more incontrovertible.

In the lovers' tale, there is "Rule and example found" (l. 14) for all those who have ever felt stirred by the "subliming fire" (l. 13) of love. The narrator and his lady are again seen through the eyes of their anticipated future audience as the definition of love, for the lovers have written the book on the subject, and have the authority of precedent. Like the Bible, their annals convey a guide to living, but unlike the Bible, they offer the added benefit of being self-evident in interpretation and universal in appeal. More than the Bible, the love book is unassailable for:

There, the faith of any ground

No schismatic will dare to wound. (ll. 15-16)

If this is so, then faith in their love's story is less prone to difference of opinion and factionalism than the very word of God. Their record seems to be immune to the differences of interpretation that weakened the Church, and thus, the narrator would argue, a more reliable guide to living a life in Caritas. Why is the record immune? Because the lovers' security in their conviction comes directly from Love personified. It is by Love that the couple is afforded the saving "grace" that will allow them

To make, to keep, to use, to be these his Records. (ll. 16-17)<sup>3</sup>

This process of collecting their letters, compiling them, and creating a "Record" is shown to us as a parallel to the production of the Bible. In such a way, the poem expresses the idea of ultimate immortality. Like Christ, they are the embodiment of the Word, and the word is as old as time itself. It is beyond all material decay. Like the Word, "This Booke, [is] as long-liv'd as the elements"(l.19).

The idea that the record of their love predates creation is perhaps slightly uncomfortable for Donne, who feels that he should qualify the assertion that their love's record is as old as "the

---

<sup>3</sup> For ease of reference, quotations of one line will be block formatted when they are explicated upon extensively in the text.



world's forme" (l. 20). We also learn that the couple is but the newest translation of Love's book, the "new made Idiome" (l. 21). Used as a textbook, the story of their love is indestructible; for though barbarians might storm the libraries where such texts are held, "Learning were safe; in this our Universe" (l. 26). The book, the mere sign of their love, can be destroyed without affecting the signified—their love that is a part of their own existence cannot be touched. In the line;

Schooles might learne Sciences, Spheares Musick, Angels Verse (l. 27)

we see a resurgence of the arrogant self-assuredness which is quintessentially Donne. Not only can the young couple act as a model for other young lovers, but they also presume to teach things to do that which they do naturally. Teaching spheres music would be analogous to teaching fish to swim—as a fact of their own existence, spheres by their nature create music. It was thought during Donne's time, that the heavenly bodies moved in harmony under the direction of the Almighty. In contrast, all that was sublunary (such as the earth and its inhabitants) was in discord—but the narrator here makes a claim that though their love is earthly it can teach the spheres to create the music that God himself directs. Likewise, Donne makes an audacious claim on the choirs of angels—that their heavenly song is nothing to the song that they will learn if they heed the example of the young couple. Angels cannot keep from singing, and were created that their heavenly song might praise God for eternity. When Donne places their love in a realm beyond reproach, he gives it a reach and influence that it might not, in truth, enjoy on Earth.

The next stanza proclaims the practical use of the book for people living with the problems specific to Earthly love. The couple's book is not just a text-book, but also a vindication of the two different types of love, Eros and Caritas. For,

Whether abstract spirituall love they like,

Their Soules exhal'd with what they do not see.

Or, loth so to amuse

Faiths infirmitie, they chuse

Something which they may see and use[,] (ll. 30-34)

the lovers will have something to speak to their problems. The abstract spiritual love is reminiscent of the first two lines of "Aire and Angels":

Twice or thrice have I loved thee

Before I knew thy face or name.

The seeing and using of Love echoes the conclusion of "Aire and Angels" in which disembodied love is useless because it cannot be actual. The "Something which they may see and use" needn't be interpreted as a purely erotic relationship, but a practical adaptation of the Caritas that is the "abstract spirituall love" of line 30. The text does not condemn this type of love, which is inevitably more physically bound than pure disembodied love,

For, though mind be the heaven, where love doth sit,

Beauty a convenient type may be to figure it, (ll. 35-36).

Rather, the text endows the erotic with as much respectability and dignity as Caritas. Both varieties are treated in the book that is their love.

The thought of this type of immortality must have been particularly appealing for a couple denied the blessing of society, and allowed them to flout their detractors by making their love the standard. Their happiness will be their detractors' punishment.

While "The Valediction of the Booke," is an "offensive" poem which preempts any disagreement from the enemies by allowing the couple to transcend mere human opinion, the "Canonization" is defensive. We are to understand the speaker's posture is a defensive one from

the very first line, which is apt to remind one of a cornered animal lashing out. He explodes:

For Godsake hold your tongue, and let me love. (l. 1)

The first stanza of the “Canonization” is a moment of self-pity, as if the speaker is saying “Haven't you done enough to ruin me? Aren't you happy now? Leave me alone!” The poem is replete with moments that hearken to biography, such as the reference to the “ruined fortune” of line 3. It is as if Donne is addressing those who made him suffer because of his love for Anne, and endure the loss of his small fortune that went to ruin. One can almost hear Donne through the speaker as he begs them to go about their own business, while deriding them as toadies who “Observe his honor, or his grace” (l. 6) and as misers who revere the “Kings [...] stamped face” (l. 7). Yet, he tells them to go on doing these things, and “approve of what they will” (l. 8), so long as they “Let [him] love.”

While the speaker does not claim to care for the opinion of these detractors, it is clear that he does indeed at least hold their opinions in enough regard to bother refuting them. It has been alleged, apparently, that the speaker's actions have been irresponsible and a detriment to society, for the narrator again bursts forth with:

Alas, alas, who's injur'd by my love? (l. 10)

The narrator here claims that even though he is in agony, that is to say, in love, the world has not changed for everyone else. What is private is private. What agony he feels, or the love he has for his lady does not affect, in Donne's typically hyperbolic terms, the workings of the world. It is as if the narrator is in the court of law where he defends his innocence of any of these “crimes” of misfortune such as the sinking of a ship because of high winds caused by his sighs. His sighs cannot be said to have caused this any more than his tears have flooded the land of a neighbor. His prosecutors—the lawyers, who “find out still/ Litigious men, which quarrels move” (ll. 16-

the very first line, which is apt to remind one of a cornered animal lashing out. He explodes:

For Godsake hold your tongue, and let me love. (l. 1)

The first stanza of the “Canonization” is a moment of self-pity, as if the speaker is saying “Haven't you done enough to ruin me? Aren't you happy now? Leave me alone!” The poem is replete with moments that hearken to biography, such as the reference to the “ruined fortune” of line 3. It is as if Donne is addressing those who made him suffer because of his love for Anne, and endure the loss of his small fortune that went to ruin. One can almost hear Donne through the speaker as he begs them to go about their own business, while deriding them as toadies who “Observe his honor, or his grace” (l. 6) and as misers who revere the “Kings [...] stamped face” (l. 7). Yet, he tells them to go on doing these things, and “approve of what they will” (l. 8), so long as they “Let [him] love.”

While the speaker does not claim to care for the opinion of these detractors, it is clear that he does indeed at least hold their opinions in enough regard to bother refuting them. It has been alleged, apparently, that the speaker's actions have been irresponsible and a detriment to society, for the narrator again bursts forth with:

Alas, alas, who's injur'd by my love? (l. 10)

The narrator here claims that even though he is in agony, that is to say, in love, the world has not changed for everyone else. What is private is private. What agony he feels, or the love he has for his lady does not affect, in Donne's typically hyperbolic terms, the workings of the world. It is as if the narrator is in the court of law where he defends his innocence of any of these “crimes” of misfortune such as the sinking of a ship because of high winds caused by his sighs. His sighs cannot be said to have caused this any more than his tears have flooded the land of a neighbor. His prosecutors—the lawyers, who “find out still/ Litigious men, which quarrels move” (ll. 16-

17) will not see a decrease in their trade merely because of the speaker's love.

Eventually, the speaker gives up on convincing his prosecutors of his innocence when he again explodes, exasperated:

Call us what you will, we are made such by love. (l. 19)

But this resignation does not last long, because the narrator immediately tells his detractors what to call them, and takes an active role in defining now what their relationship *is* as opposed to the previous two stanzas, which declare what their love is *not*. He seems determined to control public opinion for which he claims not to care. They are two “Tapers” that at “[their] own cost[s] die” (l. 21), and as such, cannot be of any interest to others. Tapers are symbols of masculine virility, and it is worth noting that he compares both male and female partners to a taper which at its own cost “dies,”--the Elizabethan euphemism for orgasm<sup>4</sup>. The belief that orgasm would shorten one's lifespan was a widely held conviction, since in the act of ejaculation one emits a bit one's essence. So, if they are destroying themselves, what should it matter to a world preoccupied with station, money, and justifying the acquisition of these? The speaker, who lost his fortune, stands for a different set of priorities.

A man who chooses a love deemed inappropriate in the eyes of the world sets himself up for ridicule and derision, but the lovers of the poem offer so much more to each other and compliment one another to such an extent that no amount of derision can destroy the inherent dignity of their relationship. People may scorn them as foolish and imprudent, but in reality they are together like the eagle and the dove. They are *both* as strong and noble like the eagle as well

---

<sup>4</sup> This euphemism seems to have arisen from the French phrase “la petite morte”--the little death that occurs every time one has an orgasm.

as righteous and holy like the dove<sup>5</sup>. They are both birds of prey, as well as birds that love only once, and mate for life. Donne uses another avian image, this time drawn from mythology, is the Phoenix of line 23. The Phoenix was a hermaphroditic bird said to self-combust and then rise from its own ashes, born anew. Self-combusted with desire, the two lovers “die” in orgasm, yet, rise the same, and “Prove mysterious by this love” (l. 27).

The act of love making, that is, when two bodies synthesize into one, and “die” as one body, becomes the means by which the couple attain immortality. Every act of sex is a physical reminder of the triumph of love over death. In love making they are “One neutral thing” into which “both sexes fit” (l. 25). They transcend gender distinctions, as much as the phoenix or the angels do. The speaker goes on to say that the couple is in a position of power in their societal martyrdom because they are in a position to determine their own “deaths,” sexual and otherwise. If their detractors will not allow them to “live by [their] love”(l. 28), then at the very least they will take command over their deaths.

Because society resists and rejects their love, the couple cannot have a public display of “tombes and hearse,” but they *can* have a monument of verse (ll. 29-30). Like their deaths, they own their verse monument, and in it they may preserve their history for posterity and attain another type of immortality. Due to their status as lovers, they are intrinsically immortal, and now the world shall know it. Though they will not be included in the officially sanctioned “Chronicle” of line 31, they will by doing more with less. For, like the “well wrought urn” of line 33, they shall create a fine memorial of verse equal to the longest chronicles of state.

Though denied the public display and dignity of a martyr, the couple can work within the language of love to construct their monument. Love, after all, is something that all can have in

---

<sup>5</sup> The eagle was often used to indicate the presence of majesty, and usually was an image associated with royalty. The dove has historically symbolized hope—as in the story of Noah's Ark, as well as a symbol of the Holy Ghost of God.

common. Whereas martyrdom for religion has a limited appeal, martyrdom for love is something that can be universally understood and appreciated by those who do not bias themselves against it. Like the “Valediction of the Book,” the couple's claim to immortality lies in the ability of poetry to transcend boundaries:

And if no peece of Chronicle wee prove,

We'll build in sonnets pretty roomes;

As well a well wrought urne becomes

The greatest ashes, as half-acre tombes. (ll. 31-34)

Do we not learn in Aristotle's *Poetics* that poetry is inherently greater than history because it has the capacity to be universal? By choosing poetry as their conduit of representation over an historical chronicle “written by the winners,” as it were, they deny the power of society to write their story by adopting a more universal form, and thus they have the capacity to touch more minds and hearts than the chronicle of line 30.

It can hardly surprise us that a man who struggled in such a personal way with these obstacles of public acceptance and respectability would adopt such a position. Though society would not immediately embrace his love for Anne, through the subversion of poetry he is able to transcend these biases and limitations. He attempted to achieve immortality through poetry, and did. In the process he gave erotic love the dignity of a love equal to “martyrdom.” He succeeds in equating the love acts of the saints performed in *agape* to the love acts of the couple performed in Eros.

Donne equates erotic love with holy love when his speaker asserts:

And by these hymnes, all shall approve

Us *Canoniz'd* for Love. (ll. 34-35)

Their erotic love will be immortalized in poetry which shall become hymns because of their subject, their association with the “sainted” couple. They are worthy of hymns not because of their eroticism (which would normally be enough to expel the poetry from the realm of the hymn—unless one is speaking of the Song of Solomon), but rather of the martyrdom of their subjects. Like the couple of “The Relic,” the couple of the “Canonization” will become a subject of veneration, and a model to be followed. Though both couples were overtly erotic, they are remembered in poetry as martyrs of the highest order. By standing up to the forces of prejudice and oppression of their detractors, the couple of the “Canonization” will be martyrs of love, immortal through poetry, and a model for all. They will be called upon, as patron saints of love, to intercede for lovers throughout the world:

Countries, Townes, Courts: Beg from above

A pattern for your love! (ll. 44-45)

The couple's example, like that of John and Anne, lays in strength in adversity and constancy in the face of disapproval. The sacrifice involved in a love that is unacceptable to society is elevated to the level of sacrifice of those who died for their faith. The faith that the couple relies on in this context is not that of God, but of faith in each other. In their eyes, their earthly, sensual love is equal to any love exalted in any hymn book. Their sexuality is a sign of their Canonization, their sainted status, for like the riddle of the Phoenix, who can “die” and rise the same, but the Phoenix, Christ, and lovers?



## Alternative Spaces:

### Chapter 2

By the year 1600, John Donne had secured a comfortable, if precarious, life and position for himself. He had served in maritime expeditions under the Earl of Essex, made many influential contacts, and probably traveled extensively in Europe. He sat in parliament from October to December of 1601 perhaps due to the condescension and support of Lord Egerton, to whom the borough belonged. However, all of these advancements were about to be lost when his four-year acquaintance with the young Anne More (niece of Lady Egerton,) finally resulted in marriage. The marriage, contracted in December of 1601, remained a secret kept from the young lady's father, George More, until February of the next year. When Donne revealed the clandestine marriage to More, retribution was swift and severe. Donne was imprisoned for a time at the Fleet, and spent most of his time writing letters to people of influence attempting to secure his freedom. Before long (though too long for Donne's comfort, one supposes), he succeeded. He was at liberty, but without position (having been dismissed from his uncle-in-law's household), and could not support himself and his new wife after the scandal. In the years following his disgrace, Donne had none of the opportunities that were open to him before as a favourite courtier. He was under no illusions that it was anything other than his imprudence with Anne More that resulted in his downfall.

Is it then any mystery to us as readers that Donne's poetry from that period may concern itself with escape to where his new bride and he could live together in relative peace without outside interference? Surely one can understand the impulse to keep the outside world at a distance, or the impulse to create a scenario in which the author has more control than has been afforded to him by mischance. It is from this period that Donne explodes with "For Godsake hold your tongue, and let me love" (The Canonization l.1). While one must be careful in reading the poetry in too autobiographical a fashion, it is clear that there must have been at the very least

a thematic or tonal connection between the trying events of this time in Donne's career and his poetic endeavors.

From the very natural impulse to control or expel his hostile surroundings where it was in his power, we get arguably the most spatially and cosmologically experimental poetry that Donne ever wrote. It can hardly be a coincidence, either, that Donne's forays into the subject of spatial imagery revolve around conceptions of love, more specifically, Caritas and the erotic love that brought about his downfall. The idea of "alternative space" is relative, and its designation changes with each poem. In all cases, it represents a manipulation of "the way things are" by way of spatial reconfiguration. It acts as a means of escape from oppressive reality, of magnifying that which elements the couple, and of expelling those things and people who threaten them.

As in the poem "The Sunne Rising," for example, the very earthy, erotic background of two lovers waking beside one another after a night of love making, is contrasted by the expansive metaphysical imagery of "She is all states, and all princes, I, / Nothing else is" (21-22). To prolong the erotic experience in this context, the narrator creates an alternative space in which the room, the bed, and in the end, the two lovers become the center of the universe. He must create a new cosmology where he and his lover are dignified and respected as the center point of existence; they are royalty of their own creation, and their domain, is, of course, the whole and entirety of creation. In such a way, Donne's poetry deals in spatial constructs within the context of Eros and Caritas, that is, Donne attempts to create the fictional space in which he and his lover can be together without outside interference, and coincidentally where Eros and Caritas can come into contest outside normal presuppositions about morality, definitions of love, and purpose of love that are carried like romantic baggage. Donne stretches, mangles and

punctures these presuppositions with vigor, although if made public, no doubt, they could be detrimental to his already precarious career.

We should remember that Donne was in a very tricky position in terms of his career, and perhaps he thought that he could not afford to allow unfriendly eyes to criticize him on account of his views on love and lust (indeed, it was at one time rendered him destitute). In the process of creating these spatial images for the purposes of “letting him love,” and then placing Eros and Caritas in contest within them, he enjoyed the benefit of posing the problem central to the poem's argument in a space separate from the world. Sometimes these constructs exist in the world, sometimes they exist outside of space and time, but they are always beyond normal existence and experience. I think that it is a way in which he was able to place the argument of the poem beyond reproach, because it is clear that the action did not take place in everyday existence.

So if a more spiritual approach to creating a felicitous relationship between Eros and Caritas (such as in the cases already illustrated involving martyrdom and the immortality of love) is not generally amenable to the task at hand, the subject of space becomes an area ripe for possibilities. For example, if one cannot be, or does not want to be convinced of the idea that love offers the opportunity for martyrdom, and universal worship by *all* lovers (and therefore, *all* humanity) for *all* of eternity, then, it is reasonable to suggest the figure of alternate space for such conflicts where the laity's opinion does not matter. Indeed, alternative space functions in much the same way as the immortality and martyrdom *topoi*, in that the two strive to remove the unpleasant confrontation between Eros and Caritas to another place that is less immediate than the here and now. The immortality and martyrdom *topoi* remove the strife to the future; alternative space removes it to another spatial construct in the here and now. Both the use of martyrdom imagery and the figure of alternative space emphasize transcendence of physical

limitations—these alternative spaces can be infinitely collapsed (such as the lovers who are each a world unto themselves in “The Good Morrow,”) or infinitely expansive (such as one man becoming all princes, one woman, all states “The Sunne Rising”). Both the martyrdom and alternative space *topoi* enjoy the advantage of making more agreeable the crises of the present. Alternative space, however, has an added benefit-- it does not require the passage of time (or indeed, dependence on an afterlife and the recognition of posterity) to achieve these ends, nor does it require a blind reliance on hopes that may or may not be realized. Instead, it utilizes a shift of perception, in all cases, to ameliorate ones position by changing the place of man in the cosmos, thus changing man's importance and permanence, and therefore the importance and permanence of his sentiments by dignifying his love.

The alternative space *topos* also heightens man's ability to become close to woman by creating another space in which the traditional laws of physics and traditional moralities do not apply; thus Donne solves the traditional problems keeping two souls from directly relating to one another. In such a way, man and woman become as angels, who have no physical barriers to their love and affection (or indeed their sexual congress). While Donne's motives in creating this space which excludes laws of physics and laws of traditional morality are debatable-- and indeed some critics have spent much time discussing it-- the effect that Donne creates is a space in which we can “let him love” without reproach and where he can escape persecution (both in poetry and in life) for his “radical” ideas. He makes a safe place for Eros and Caritas to contend with one another, but in some cases succeeds in side-stepping (or perhaps transcending) the issue altogether due to the other-worldliness of his constructs.

When treating the question of Donne's alternative spaces in the negotiation between Eros and Caritas, one must first address the question of experimentalism. Is it that Donne is simply

making a world which does not function in the way that ours does to conduct a poetic social experiment in “the way things might be” between Eros and Caritas without having the restraint of earthly existence with which to contend? Is there a deeper necessity in the creation of these spaces, or is he simply satisfying an urge to be left alone by the world in order to love his mistress in peace? Is it too little to discuss the nature of these spaces without a context? Are the spaces independent of the purpose for which they are created? To what extent are these alternative spaces reliant on context and to what extent does that affect our reading?

While it is clear that John Donne was in general a very experimental writer, it is difficult to assume that his innovations of space were academic in nature. Donne may have been merely “walking his wits,” but this does not seem to be the case given the moment in the poems that alternate space and cosmological paradigm shifts occur most often. “The Sunne Rising,” for example, begins with an imperative directed at the sun to go summon other people to greet the day, and leave he and his lover to linger in bed a bit longer. When it becomes clear that the Sunne is not inclined to heed his command, “Donne” shifts the cosmological paradigm. The new order is centered around himself and his lover, for they literally (in the speaker of the poem's view) become the entire world and the totality of humanity. He demands that the sun

Aske for those Kings whom thou saw'st yesterday,

And thou shalt heare, All here in one bed lay.

She'is all States, and all Princes, I,

Nothing else is. (ll. 19-22)

After making this paradigm shift, Donne cites the agency that makes this cosmological change possible, that of Love. Love is exempt from the effects of the markers of time, it

no season knowes, nor clyme,

Nor houres, dayes, moneths, which are the rags of time. (ll. 9-10)

Already he insists on the alternative space that love creates, a place completely immune to the tyranny of time, as was noted in the discussion on the Immortality of Love. He does not stop there, but goes on to denigrate the sun further by using his exempt status as a weapon against the sun, to threaten it with extinction (l. 13). It becomes clear that from his position, he is able, and more than willing to wage war on the sun, saying:

If her eyes have not blinded thine,

Looke, and to morrow late, tell mee,

Whether both th'India's of spice and Myne

Be where thou lefst them, or lie here with mee.

Aske for those Kings whom thou saw'st yesterday,

And thou shalt heare, All here in one bed lay (ll. 15-20).

Donne takes away the sun's dignity, its power, its brightness, and its subjects away from him, creating an alternate world in the context of his relations with his partner. As if *that* weren't bad enough, he negates everything else but his lover and himself, destroying the kings of which he spoke earlier, assimilating them into his being, and allowing that every state be assimilated into her being: "She'is all States, and all Princes, I, Nothing else is" (ll. 21-2).

He is defiant, and asserts his, and therefore her status as the center and purpose of the Sun's revolutions; but when he says:

Shine here to us, and thou art every where;

This bed thy center is, these walls, thy sphere (ll. 29-30)

he further degrades the sun by confining it to the bedroom, assuring us of the lengths to which the narrator will go to be with his mistress, and the lengths to which Donne will go to dignify the

erotic scene by giving it a new cosmological milieu.

In "The Good-Morrow," Donne uses alternative space to describe the power of love to carve a separate existence for lovers while glossing the problems that this phenomenon attempts to solve. The first hint of what is at stake in the poem occurs in the third and fourth lines when the narrator asks what he and his lover did before the moment they met-- is it that they

suck'd on countrey pleasures, childishly?

Or snorted we in the seaven sleepers den?

The word "countrey" describes not only the simple pleasures of rural life, but can also refer to the pleasures of the flesh (as we have often seen in Shakespeare<sup>6</sup>) by punning on what has come down to us as the word "cunt." An orthographic concern, though perhaps a small point, is worth notice: in Elizabethan typeface, the letter "s" was printed in such a way as to make it very similar in appearance to the letter "f." Though an "s" was meant in the word "suck'd," if one were to read it in Elizabethan typeface, one could hardly avoid replacing the "s" with an "f;" as such, it is a very erotic reference, describing the lazy casualness of their earlier dabbling in erotic endeavors.

But the narrator offers an alternative record of past experience with love when he writes, "snorted we in the seaven sleepers den." (l.4) The reference is to the legend of seven Christian children who were walled up in a cave because they refused to accept pagan religion (marked perhaps by revels and rituals such as the country children may have enjoyed). Obviously, it connotes innocence, martyrdom for the faith, and a detachment from the workings and trappings of the world that is often reflected in the idea of Caritas. By placing these two variant experiences at odds, one would expect the narrator to resolve which was the actual course of their history, but he does not. Instead, the narrator says simply: "T'was so" (l. 5). It becomes

---

<sup>6</sup> See *Hamlet* III.II



possible to have both experiences simultaneously, that is, one can have experience in love, and love making, yet be as pure as the Christian children walled away from the world for seven years. It seems to be a contradiction, but reading on, we realize that these two experiences and pleasures were just fancies, and any beauty that there was to be found in them, was a premonition of her. The narrator seduces her with the lines:

If ever any beauty I did see,

Which desired, and got, t'was but a dreame of thee. (ll. 6-7)

The desiring and getting is clearly a sensual reference to the “country pleasures” in line three, but the fact that they were all merely a mirage, a shadow, a dream of his lover point to a love based not in pleasures of the flesh, but rather a love based in ideals. She is much greater than what he has “desir'd, and got” because all of his life, all of his experience was merely a vision of her.

The fleeting pleasures of erotic love were merely evaporations of her being.

The narrator follows this theme of sublime love, when he apparently wakes next to his lover, however he does not speak of their bodies next to one another, or of the waking of the body, but references the “Waking soules,/ Which watch not one another out of feare.” (ll. 8-9) We are to assume that there can be no fear, because the souls are wholly and completely in love, and “love of other sights controules,”(l. 10) for fear and anxiety are matters that do not concern naked souls. Like angels, they are unable to comprehend the idea of fear in such a context. There can be no jealousy, for what one soul does, if they are truly bound together, then the other must of necessity also do. In line 10, he proposes love as the remedy for fear, and we may assume with some confidence that he does not refer to the love of the country children of line three, but rather the love that transcends mere sensuality and precludes jealousy.

This love and their watching one another with tenderness creates an alternative space

between their watchful souls in which there is both infinite closeness, and infinite expansiveness. Their love, being of the nature described above, is at once exempted from the cares and concerns of more earthy lovers, yet the space is meant to contain “everywhere.” It is a portable escape from the concerns of the world, and at the same time consists of the entire world. He exhorts “sea-discoverers” to go to their “new worlds” (l. 12), and leave maps for the use of others who need to be shown “worlds on worlds” (l. 13). He, on the other hand, has no need for either, for the two “posesse one world, each hath one, and is one” (l. 14). The two souls are at once whole and presumably sufficient unto themselves, and yet fully integrated with one another. One can hardly avoid the image of two spheres meeting and overlapping, and eventually melding into one, as the “worlds on worlds” would do.

But, in typical Donne fashion, he cannot allow the moment to fly too far off into the metaphysical, and since souls cannot fulfill their purpose if they are completely without form, he forces the “waking soules” to become reembodied. He does this admirably with a double chiasmus in line 15; instead of naked souls admiring one another, and thus themselves (being an odd trait of souls in unison; any admiration of the other is also self-admiration), the narrator brings us back to the physical with “My face in thine eye, thine in mine appears” (l. 15). The face is the ultimate expression of physical individuality, thus the complete opposite of the souls of the previous stanza, but cannot be seen or interpreted without the eye, the proverbial “window to the soul,” and a staple of neo-platonic understandings. In the simple action of lovers looking at one another, Donne displays the necessary dependence between the two extreme forms of love, that of the erotic, and that of a more platonic bent, much as souls cannot have agency without the body. In addition, the double chiasmus surrounds “thine” with “my” and “mine” which all surround eye, perhaps a pun on the first person singular. In such a way Donne

connects the spatial configuration of the words on the page to the sense of the piece. His eye/I is enveloped immediately by her, but in a construction that he himself creates and controls (in much the same way that Donne wishes to control their physical space in the poem) by being surrounded by “my and mine.”

The narrator then goes on to say that “true plaine hearts doe in the faces rest” (l. 16) further impressing on the reader the importance of the physical, because it is in this realm that the sublime may manifest itself. After the flying rhetoric of the previous stanza, Donne puts limitations upon the feasibility of the kind of relationship that creates the alternate space of the poem. Now the souls must not only take body, but are limited in expression to that of the abilities of the body, making the compromise between purely erotic love and Caritas disproportionately weighted on the physical. Even so, it is the best that lovers can hope for, for the speaker concedes,

Where can we finde two better hemispheares

Without sharpe North, without declining West? (ll. 17-18)

It is not an uncommon *topos* in Donne's poetry, that of a necessary, slightly disappointing but nonetheless satisfactory compromise of Eros and Caritas. It is as if the narrator has to console himself in line 20 when he says “What ever dyes, was not mixt equally.” In effect, he is proclaiming that a love not tempered with soul or with physicality cannot survive. The idea that everything under the moon was unequally mixed, thus subject to decay, must not have escaped him, either. He makes an equal mixture his ideal, thus solving the problem of privileging one over the other, yet leaves the possibility of such a union of souls as in stanza two to occur on occasion. Even so, the narrator understands that a perfect mixture of anything on Earth is not really possible, and so goes on to list the best possibilities for love if it weighs too heavily on the

erotic or on the platonic, that is,

If our two loves be one, or, thou and I

Love so alike, that none doe slacken, none can die. (ll. 21-22)

Not one to be contented with such a neat resolution, Donne tints and complicates these final lines with the sexual innuendo of lovers loving each other in a way so similar, that it never grows flaccid (as a purely spiritual love might), and never reaches climax (the sole purpose of an exclusively erotic encounter). The end result is a stasis in which one is perpetually aroused, but never relieved—perhaps an argument for letting *la joie regne suprême*—and an argument against the conclusion he supposedly reaches!

Obviously, two loves being one is the ideal here, as it was for the “waking souls,” but we have already established that such a moment cannot be as expansive in time as it is in space, and therefore, bodies must also take part. So, the compromise is that the two must love each other to the same degree as well as they can as embodied souls. As long as the love does not become disproportionate, then it cannot die, but what a precarious position for the lovers who became their own room, their own world, their own everywhere all at once!

Whereas the “Good Morrow” pours all matter inward upon the couple and collapses the universe to fit in their bed, in “The Extasie,” the space between two lovers is an entity into which one's soul may advance or retreat, and which may be used as a filter from which one can part “purer than [one comes]” (l. 28). In the beginning of “The Extasie” we are let into a room where two lovers, sitting side by side, are entwined in an impossible configuration. The speaker tells us that the lovers sit with:

Our hands were firmly cimented

With a fast balme, which thence did spring,

Our eye-beams twisted, and did thread

Our eyes, upon one double string (ll. 5-8)

Their bodies are connected via the space between them, with only their hands making physical contact. They are in a state of inertia, it seems, but in the space between a man and his lover, the souls “negotiate” (l. 17). Here, like

two equall Armies, Fate

Suspends uncertain victorie, (ll 13-14)

and this parley happens silently between them “whilst [...] / [they like sepulchrall statues lay” (ll. 17-18). Their souls

(which to advance their state,

Were gone out,) [and] hung 'twixt her, and mee. (ll. 14-15)

In this moment, it is as if the lovers have projected themselves out of their bodies for their souls to mingle on some “astral” plane. The speaker insists that we see this as a noble endeavor, for it is the sign of a “good love” that it is “growen all minde” (ll. 22-23). Though physical contact is kept at a minimal at the moment, the souls are connected in such a way within this secret space between their connected eyes that if one were to speak, so would the other—united souls must necessarily “speak the same” (ll. 25-26). The speaker does not understand the moment as a sexual one, but soon, arises a

A single violet transplant,

The strength, the color, and the size,

(All which before was poore, and scant,)

Redoubles still, and multiplies. (ll. 37-40)

This astral mingling, though at the same time compared to warring armies, and at the

same time a purification of souls, has resulted in a physical manifestation—the male erection. The speaker explains that “When love, with one another so/ Interanimates two soules,/ That abler soule, which thence doth flow,/ Defects of loneliness controules” (ll. 41-44). To bring about the physical connection between bodies that mirrors the experience of the soul, the male “abler soule” becomes erect by a redirecting of the energy created between the two of them. It is filtered down to his nether regions, and therefore his erection is simply a sign that the intermingling of souls has been a success, and is ready to be made physical.

The value of embodiment is also at issue in “The Extasie.” Like the angels of heaven, the lovers first work in the realm of air, the space where a “soule into soule may flow,” and can mingle, like disembodied angels may mingle, at will. Again we see the same conundrum discussed in “Aire and Angels;” a platonic love, no matter how earnest, cannot be actual unless it takes physical form. In reference to this problem, Donne writes:

So must pure lovers soules descend  
T'affections, and to faculties,  
Which sense may reach and apprehend,  
Else a great Prince in prison lies. (ll. 65-68)

Human love cannot reach its full potential unless it is allowed physicality. Their souls' “negotiations,” though external must end in physical resolution. The space between their eyes, then, is the realm of platonic Caritas, but is a space which cannot stand alone. This is not a fact that bothers the speaker, for he says “Loves mysteries in soules doe grow,/ But yet the body is his booke” (ll. 71-72). The revelations shown in this space must be translated into human physical language if it is to be understood, or put to use. The platonic love of the souls in “negotiation,” and the erotic love represented by the “single violet transplant” are equal parts of

the whole, which is “human love.” One does not compromise the purity of ones affections by going to one's body because the change is so small between platonic union and erotic union, that an observer would not be able to tell the difference.

## **Sacramental Sexuality:**

### **Chapter 3**



Anne More Donne died at the age of 33, the age of Christ at the Crucifixion, shortly after giving birth to a still-born child. Her death came as a shock to John Donne. Though undoubtedly counseled otherwise, Donne felt at least in one way responsible; he seemed to be convinced that his passion for her killed her. John and Anne had been married for sixteen years, and during those years she had given birth twelve times. The couple who had “adventured equally” (Coffin 380) into a love that the world looked down upon was no more. The strength and quality of their relationship was as much defined by their love as it was by their sheer tenacity. Not only was their love a strong one, but it consumed John entirely. We can feel his preoccupation with her in his letter to Sir George More: “But for her, whom I tender more, then my fortunes, or life (else I would I might neither joy in this life, more enjoy the next, all my love is directed unchangeably upon her.” (Coffin 380) So much did he love her, that he was *dolore Infans*,<sup>7</sup> upon her death.

But as M. Thomas Hester writes in his preface to John Donne's “desire of more,” John Donne was not “speechless” about his love for Anne more during her lifetime and after” (Hester 9). Rather, his undeniable desire for her and the broader implications of earthly desire in living a holy and correct life with God both during and after her life. These things may have become the thorn in Donne's side that inspired poems such as “Batter my heart three person'd God,” and most notably, and easily traceable to the death of his beloved wife, the Holy Sonnet “Since she whom I love has paid her last debt.”<sup>8</sup> In such a way, the relationship of John and Anne Donne becomes a microcosm of the struggle between passion and compassion, lust and love.

To treat Eros and Caritas in an academic manner is all very well, but with the

<sup>7</sup> Literally, Speechless with Grief-- from the gravestone of Anne More Donne which Donne composed himself. *Infans* is possibly a pun on his silence, as well as recognition of the child buried with her.

<sup>8</sup> One cannot be absolutely certain of the dates of these poems, but we can be reasonably sure that at least “Batter my heart three person'd God” and “Since she whom I love has paid her last debt” were written during the period in Donne's life when he knew Anne, or after her death.

introduction of Anne's Death, Donne's poetic dialog takes on a more immediate tone, as well as lends the gravity inherently associated with death and the hereafter. In the lines from "Batter my Heart,"

Take mee to you, imprison mee, for I,  
 Except you'enthrall mee, never shall be free,  
 Nor ever chaste, except you ravish mee, (ll. 12-14)

we see a clear mingling of erotic imagery with the God's love, necessary to salvation.

Ravishment is now not just something to which woman must submit, but Donne must also, in order to save his very soul. The role reversal is stark. However, Donne was not a stranger to the idea that sexuality and holy love can be mingled. In what we may believe to be a rather early poem, "The Flea," Donne, by way of jocular, and even provoking seduction, makes the loss of virginity as inconsequential as a flea bite. In doing this, Donne creates a physical representation (or even physical reality) of the "marriage bed," and "marriage temple" in the body of the flea.

The sexuality described in the poem is one that is constructed in terms of, and set in opposition to, the holy sacrament by which man and woman become one flesh, that is marriage, or in some, more strained interpretations, the Eucharist<sup>9</sup>. The argument is essentially one in which the narrator tries to manipulate the understanding that man and woman become flesh in marriage to argue for premarital sexual relations. In doing so, the narrator realizes that he is minimizing the importance of ceremony in marriage when he says:

Mark but this flea, and mark in this,  
 How little that which thou deny'st me is (ll. 1-2).

<sup>9</sup> These interpretations generally rely on the line "This flea is you and I" (12) and the line of Catholic liturgy *Hoc est corpus meum* which taken literally means "This is my Body," instead the proponents of a Eucharistic interpretation see the line echoing with *Hoc est corpus nostrum*. See M. Thomas Hester's work "Let me Love": *Reading the Sacred 'Currant' of Donne's Profane Lyrics*"

It is just a tiny sacrifice that he asks, since the flea

sucked [him] first, and now sucks thee,

And in this flea, our two bloods mingled bee, (ll. 2-3)

as in the sacrament of marriage. It is a natural conclusion that since they are married in the body of the flea, that they should then physically consummate the marriage. If they are married, her surrender cannot be seen to be “a sinne, nor shame, nor losse of maidenhead” (l.6).

In this sacramental temple, the flea:

enjoys before it woo,

And pamper'd swells with one blood made of two

And this, alas, is more than we would do.” (ll. 7-9)

The image of the flea's belly swelling “pamper'd” with “one blood made of two” is an echo of pregnancy. Some critics have said, such as Marotti in his book John Donne, Coterie Poet, with some cause, that this element of the poem read in combination with John Donne's letter to Sir George More, in which Donne post-dates his marriage to Anne, indicates that the poem is a defense of Anne's premarital pregnancy.

Theresa DiPasquale, in her essay “‘The Flea’ as Profane Eucharist,” has an interpretation in which the seduction of the young lady works upon Protestant sensibilities of iconoclasm. In such a reading, the crushing of the flea beneath her thumbnail is not a sign of rejection of the narrator himself, but rather the rejection of the icon of the Eucharist. In the end of the poem, the narrator observes that “thou / Find'st not thy self, nor me the weaker now” (l. 24), and dares her to take the analogy one step further and crush the icon which DiPasquale sees as being equally as inconsequential, the icon of virginity which does not contain a woman's honor, but is merely the outside show of it. DiPasquale writes that “an intact ‘maidenhead’ is not the ‘honor’ with which

tradition equates it; and because there is such a gap between the signifier and signified, the destruction of the sign will not effect the underlying truth" (179).

Framing the "argument" for seduction in a way as to place it in the realm of the sacramental is a tactic that is not only difficult to deny, but almost impossible to refuse. The logic with which the narrator approaches the subject is centered around the meaninglessness of icons when in reference to the divine. In crushing the flea, the woman not only shows her anger with the narrator, but tacitly shows that she subscribes to the same general understanding. The lady's destruction of the flea does not necessarily indicate her unwillingness to "cooperate," but may even show a woman who is not in the end concerned with outwardly representations of a sacrament that is at its base, a contract between two people.

Most importantly, then, one can see that the significance of the sacrament of marriage in this context, is not in the outward display of a wedding ceremony, but rather a joining of bodies and blood in a (presumably lifelong) commitment. We are to believe, then, that the consummation of a marriage in the flesh is not merely a "sealing of the deal" but is in fact, the whole "deal" itself. The wedding ceremony is superfluous, as much as the blood that the flea sucked from the two lovers, the absence of which the couple will hardly miss. In other words, sex *is* the sacrament. It is the perfect marriage of the erotic and the holy, the perfect justification for itself.

The erotic coupling of two individuals, then, with the intention of mutual commitment becomes the place where they "more than married are" (l. 11). It would be an attractive assumption to think the justification of sex for its sacramental power of union implies an apology on Donne's part for any premarital relations that he had with Anne who "met" with him "though parents grudge" (l. 14) While making a direct connection between "The Flea" and this bit of

biographical information may be conjectural, the image of a woman caught between "parents," and the "we" of the amorous couple sounds entirely possible for the situation.

However one chooses to read the poem, whether in a biographical mode or in a more detached way, the crushing of the flea is the only outward action of the otherwise silent woman in the poem. Whether she is rejecting the iconology of sacrament, or simply ridding herself of a pesky vermin, we are never to know. The hyperbolic language that the narrator uses in response may be the only clue as to the meaning of the action that we are allowed, and his ever shifting tactics of persuasion do not help matters. We can, however, understand that for the narrator of the poem, the most important suggestion is that the ceremony of marriage is not as close to the true meaning of the sacrament as the actual physical and spiritual joining of two people.

Donne would have much to gain, both personally, and professionally, if he were able to persuade himself and others of this conviction. John and Anne, just as the couple in "the Flea," had chosen for reasons of their own-- which we can never know for certain-- to turn their backs on accepted norms of convention. Marriage during John Donne's day, in actuality, was not merely a contract between two people. Rather, for those of higher station, such as Anne More, a marriage was contracted after a lengthy negotiation between the father of the woman and that of the prospective groom. It was also a public affair, and must receive community approbation. Each Sunday for several weeks, the marriage banns were read in the church whence the couple would be married, and congregants were free to voice objections to the match. In choosing a very private ceremony with just a handful of people in attendance, John and Anne not only rebelled against tradition, but also against accepted forms of ceremony in the church. It was for this reason that a choice that we today would consider personal, offended so many and was, in fact, illegal in both a civil and ecumenical sense. Not only did Donne succumb to his erotic

desires, but he had neglected to give the affair at least the veneer of respectability, an offense unforgivable in Elizabethan England.

But while the connection between premarital sexual relations and love-making sanctioned by the state of marriage is used in "The Flea" to wheedle ones way into a woman's petticoat, there are several more serious poems that carry on a conversation about the sexuality that can permeate one's spiritual life in a respectable, even sacramental way. "Batter my Heart Three Person'd God" is one such poem. The speaker of "The Flea" uses sacrament as a means of seduction, the speaker of "Batter my Heart" demands to be beaten into submission and seduced in a sacramental act of penance.

In the very first words of the poem:

Batter my heart, three person'd God,

God is shown to be the actor of the poem, and the human heart, symbol of love, is subject to Him. Donne, then, sets the agenda in the very first words. The force of God shown in the term "batter" is in direct conflict with the heart, and it becomes clear that the speaker of the poem wants God to change his heart through force. Right away, one realizes that the poem is not a prayer to God, a hope, a wish, but rather a *command* to the Almighty. While the speaker claims to desire the state of submission in which he can be perfected by God, the tone of the poem speaks to an arrogance of disposition that is in dissonance with his supposed purpose of address. Since he is not naturally disposed to submission, force is indicated. The images Donne uses to illustrate the type of correction that is necessary are three, one is the metal-working God that

knock[s], breathe[s], shine[s], and seeke[s] to mend [. . .]

break[s], blow[s], burn[s], and makes [him] new. (ll. 2,4)

The second image is that of the conqueror and invader God who makes the speaker

like an usurpt towne, to'another due (l. 5)

and the third image is that of a jealous God who will come to save his love from the clutches of the "enemie" (l. 10).

Throughout, one can see a narrator, subject to God's chastening force, who *struggles* to be submissive. The narrator attempts to do what very few people do, and that is to actively do something to bring about one's own helplessness. How can a metal, if cognizant of its deficiencies, actively seek purification and beautification? How can a town wish its own ruin? Like the metal and the town, submission runs contrary to his nature. While he begins the poem with insentient objects, he cannot refrain from transferring his desires into a more human (and humane) context. As the poem progresses through the three images, the subject goes from inanimate, like metal, or a town, to a sensible human being. Likewise, the narrator of the poem changes roles in relation to God.

To be in the right relationship with God, and therefore to be in a state worthy of salvation, he must fulfill two seemingly contradictory roles, that of the child of God, and that of the spouse of Christ. I do not mean to interpret this textual tension by way of Freudian analysis but rather by way of Christian paradox. The first two images remind one of an errant child in need of correction, but oddly, lessen the level of implied responsibility of the sinner. What fault is it of a metal if it is not naturally perfect, and therefore needs to be moulded or beaten into a beautiful object, suitable for the purpose for which it was created? What fault is it of a town if it is invaded, and why would a town ever ask to be invaded? It would seem that the constant round of raping and pillaging would be dissuasion enough. In opposition to the prior subjects' relative guiltlessness, the third subject, in the position of responsibility to be the lover of Christ, has committed a sin of action--that is, to side with the "enemie" and form an alliance with him (or

her). The enemy, or adversary, literally translated as *satan* in Hebrew, does not necessarily have to denote the Devil with which Christian tradition equates it. A *satan* can be any enemy of God's or of his people—anyone who distracts the faithful from following the way of God. In such a way, one can interpret the line;

But am betoth'd unto your enemy (l. 10)

as an alliance between the narrator and any of the numerous stumbling blocks (as St. Paul would have them) that keep him from full and free worship of God. God's *satan* can, then, refer to the Devil, sin-- original or otherwise-- or another person whose existence serves as a distraction from the narrator's relationship with God. The narrator has either willingly, through his errant ways sided with the Devil, or unwillingly through some predisposition-- such as original sin-- aligned himself with a *satan* of God, and is in need of rescue.

At this moment, the narrator changes from an errant child in need of chastisement, insensible of his or her deficiencies, to an adult, thoroughly capable of rejecting his sins of action, and embracing Christ as lover; yet he is unable to do so. Again, force is indicated; yet, the nature of this force is not the mechanical knock, breathe, and shine of the first image; it is sexual in tone. In order to be the spouse of Christ, one must be the lover of Christ, and Donne seems to take this literally. Donne tells God He must:

Divorce mee [from thy enemy], 'untie, or breake that knot againe. (l. 11)

The knot which ties the narrator to God's enemy has already been broken, and must be broken again. But when was this knot first broken? Can a man once married to Christ turn back to his sinful ways after such a definite change brought about by the hand of the Almighty?

Apparently yes, if we are to assume the knot was the cord entwining every human heart at birth



due to "man's first disobedience,"<sup>10</sup> that is, original sin, and the fact that the narrator is "betroth'd unto the enemy" and not married to him (although a marriage has been arranged) proves that these bonds are not final, and are imminently reversable. But in the life of a child, the first step that divorces a child's soul from *satan* is bringing him or her into communion with the church—this is achieved in the sacrament of Baptism. In the lines:

Yet dearley'I love you,' and would be loved faine,

But am betroth'd unto youremie:

Divorce mee,' untie, or breake that knot again (ll. 9-11)

the narrator commands that God baptise him anew, to re-break those ties to the adversary, but this time to make it permanent by not allowing him to sin again. This baptism is not for the benefit of a sinful child, but rather for a lover betrayed (as indicated by words such as betroth'd, and divorce which surround the sacrament of marriage on either side). It is not quite the mild benediction of "Go forth and sin no more" that the narrator is after, but a forcible submission to God's will. He does not want to "go forth" any more and exhorts the lover Christ,

Take mee to you, imprison me (l. 12)

as if Christ were the white knight riding in to rescue him from *satan*, but with the price of his freedom.

As in any self-respecting fairy tale, the narrator expects to be carried off by his lover/rescuer, and to live happily ever after. But it is as though Donne is working against these expectations and bringing to light the less mentioned side of the arrangement—that of sexual submission to the conqueror. If Christ enthralls and ravishes his conquest (as in lines 13 and 14,) then it is an act not entirely without redeeming qualities. It is through this ravishment that the speaker can become chaste—for in the act of sexual union, he will become one with Christ, and

---

<sup>10</sup> Milton's *Paradise Lost*

therefore, holier than if God had simply absolved him and set him free. The imprisoned narrator is subject to continual enthrallment and ravishment, and such is the price to pay for salvation.

So, in the poem "Batter my Heart," salvation and mercy come from the complete submission of spirit and body to the Almighty in both agape (as a child of God) and eros (as a lover of Christ). Penance cannot be made without punishment, and the stumbling blocks to ones relationship with God must be discarded.

It is in this spirit that one may read "Since She Whom I Lov'd Hath Paid Her Last Debt." In it, we see a man, disoriented with the loss of his love, struggling to find (and define) his relationship with God after her departure. Many have read "Since she whom I loved" as a poem with close ties to the biographical, and I must count myself among them. For the poem makes most sense in this context, and, in the words of Michael Schoenfeldt, it would be "insane" if it was not inspired by Donne's loss of Anne. The poem begins:

Since she whom I lov'd hath payd her last debt

To Nature, and to hers, and my good is dead (ll. 1-2).

It is a rather conventional beginning, invoking the idea of death as a debt to God for the life He loaned to the deceased. This very introduction of convention and euphemism into the work sets up the text as a simple poem in which we may expect to read about a man who, upon the loss of his wife, has to turn to God for his sustainance. In some critics' readings, such as that of Mary Papazian in her paper "Donne's Secular and Sacred Reactions to Loss: From Nothingness to God's Tender Jealousy,"<sup>11</sup> the poem does not push against this expectation of convention and euphemism. In readings such as these, the narrator has been used to receiving the love of God through his wife, and is now more capable of accepting His love for that fact. For instantiation,

---

<sup>11</sup> Paper delivered at the twenty-first meeting of the John Donne Society on February 18<sup>th</sup> 2006

these critics will look to lines three and four in which the speaker states:

And her Soule early into heaven ravished,  
Wholly on heavenly things my mind is sett (ll. 3-4).

But if this interpretation is correct, then the poem might well stop at the fourth line because the problem (or indeed the problem of the lack of problem) is solved. If the poem were just a statement of his turning to God for love and sustenance after his wife's death, then the poem might end here.

To this point in the poem, Donne has remained fairly conventional. However, when one reads back, one realizes that the reason why his mind is wholly set on "heavenly things," is because she was "into heaven ravished," and is now, herself, is one of those heavenly things. While she was alive,

Here the admyring her my mind did whett  
To seeke thee God; so streames do shew their head (ll. 5-6).

He considers her a creature sent from heaven to let him know God. She has succeeded in this, for

though [he] has found [God], and [God] [his] thirst hast fed  
A holy thirsty dropsy melts [him] yet. (ll. 7-8)

One might ask, and rightly so, that if his mind is wholly on "heavenly things," why does he have a preoccupation with such physical imagery? The very image of thirst melting him is one that requires close attention on the reader's part to physical condition. To what do we owe this burst of sensuality in the midst of a poem professing to be wholly detached from the physical in favor of communion with the divine?

In this moment, we are meant to understand that although his "thirst" has been fed by

God, who is in all things sufficient, in this case, it is not enough. The admiring of her *did* whet his appetite for a relationship with God, but only as much as she whetted his appetite for things sensual. There is something missing from the equation by which the speaker came to know God, and that is the physical and sensual presence of his wife. The following lines of the poem speak to the loss of this heavenly conduit, and the speaker's struggle in defining his relationship with God now that his "good is dead." The speaker wishes that he could simply transfer his affections from his earthly wife to his heavenly husband, Christ, but the "holy thirsty dropsy" which melts him causes him to ask:

But why should I begg *more* Love; when as thou

Dost woee my soule for hers; offring all thine (ll. 9-10; emphasis mine)

It is only because of his love for his wife that he is willing to let his soul be wooed by God.<sup>12</sup> His earthly love for his wife is echoed in line nine, as Donne likely puns on his own wife's name. He seems to be disturbed at his preoccupation with the memory of his departed lover, who acted as intermediary between himself and God and reminded him of God's grace, but whose memory now acts as a hindrance to his relationship with God. Why should he long for her who was merely a reflection of His holy love?

Having first experienced God's love through her flesh and her presence, he is unable to allow himself to forget her physical presence. Instead of accepting her role as a conduit of God's presence, and attaching his affections on the "head" of her stream of grace after her passing, he is stuck. He must assume a new role, that of the spouse of Christ, and the only point of reference that he has to understand this role is his wife Anne's perfect model. He is in a double bind, then; he cannot assume this role without a model of behavior, but he knows this model as *his* wife,

---

<sup>12</sup> In the line "Dost woee my soule for hers; offring all thine," there is a textual discrepancy which may beg a variant reading. In some texts, this line appears "Dost woee my soule, for hers offring all thine" In the first, God woos the narrator for 'her' sake. In the second, she offers God to the narrator.

andwhile reflecting upon her example, he remembers how he loved her in her wifely role. The remembrance of her sensual, erotic self is not something that he wishes to forget, but rather on which he wishes to linger. Though God's holy love ought to be enough, Donne is frustrated to find that it is not. In addition, Anne's spiritual presence is capable of persisting after her death, for this reason Donne's memories of Anne's spiritual love represent a stumbling block that removal of her physical presence cannot conquer.

God has taken Donne's wife, has "ravished" her, and Donne is jealous. Anne is now the bride of Christ, as Donne is expected to, but cannot, be. This thinly veiled jealousy is projected onto God Himself who, while fearful of man's idolatry of Angels and Saints, is equally as fearful of his attachment to things of the "World, Fleshe, ...[and] Devill" (l. 14). It is a warning to Donne, not to idolize his departed "saint" *or* her fleshly body. This jealous God seems a projection of the anxieties permeating the discussion about what it means to be both a husband to a woman and a spouse of Christ. On the one hand, marriage should have prepared him for his union with Christ, but on the other, his passion for her, which he cannot or does not want to drown, persists, and acts as a stumbling block to having a "correct" relationship with God. Now, Christ may enjoy his wife in a way that he cannot, and it tears him up with grief.

Donne realizes that he must give up Anne, because his relations with her were worldly and fleshly, and they threaten his receptivity to God:

But in thy tender jealousy dost doubt

Least the World, Fleshe, yea Devill putt thee out. (ll. 13-14)

The poem makes it clear that Donne is not willing to do this because "[h]e looks to the absent bride of Christ that he may become; but in doing so, he makes present to himself the earthly bride he still desires. In showing her husband how to welcome the Bridegroom, Anne can't help

but remind him of how good it felt to be one” (DiPasquale Ambivalent p. 192).

At the end of the poem, we can hardly deny the difficulty and outright precariousness of Donne's situation. He does not offer us much in the way of resolution, because the problem is not one that can be dismissed with rhetorical twists. In “Since She Whom I Lov'd,” we are given to understand that the experience of the erotic is but a rung on the ladder of pure love, which ascends to heaven, and in knowing the erotic, one can come to know God. However, if one cannot rise above attachment to the erotic in order to embrace the pure power of God's love underlying every proper earthly love, then one has committed idolatry, and is subject to the corrective anger and tender jealousy of God. Donne is not ready to give up his marriage to Anne because he loved her for her own sake (in Eros), as well as for God's (in Caritas), and it is for his own sake that he still clings to the erotic memories of her flesh.

As Louis Martz writes, the ending of “Since she whom I lov'd” “...is a most precarious resolution.” (108) In it, we see a man desperately clinging to the sacrament of marriage between man and woman, but unable to transcend this sacrament for one that is infinitely more valuable for the soul's progress—that of marriage with Christ and becoming a part in the body of Christ. In a striking way, the human love of Eros is incompatible with the love of God, Caritas. No attempt is made to justify their coexistence, no attempt is made at compromise, and we have no clear idea of which love Donne will end up pursuing in the end-- even though such a resolution would be easy to attain in the context of the poem. It would be simple for Donne to write: “although my wife is gone, and I miss her greatly, I know now that I need to focus on God, and remember that though I fell in love with her feminine charms, they were nothing but a sign directing me to God.” He does not. What he does give us, however, is the poem that is the least twisted in rhetorical terms, yet paradoxically, the most tortured in terms of emotion. He does not

attempt to make sexual love and God's pure love compatible, either by violence or by artifice. Earthly marriage, and marriage to Christ are not the same thing, and he does not insist that we equate them.



From the voice of the fulsome and lascivious narrator of his youth to the measured and wise narrator of his age, John Donne undertakes an expression of human love with a breadth and nuance that is almost unrivaled. Instead of accepting the idea that erotic love and sublime love must be mutually exclusive, Donne pushes against preconceptions that limit the human experience. One can love both purely and ardently, in fact, Donne encourages us to do so. He speaks with one qualification, stemming from his loss of his wife—that we should not allow any earthly love to overshadow our love for God. In all other respects, we see a poet that is determined to make erotic and platonic loves coexist, whether that means dignifying erotic love with the prospect of immortality, creating an alternative universe that revolves around a couple and their love, or using rape imagery to describe the act of penance, and the grace of absolution.

John Donne was a rake, lover, dean, minister, father, husband, and poet, but he will always be remembered for his poetry. The enduring qualities of his poetry speak to us across the centuries with echoes of loss, humiliation, pride, pain, joy, love, and lust. The love that ruined him would be the same love that inspired some of the English language's most powerful representations of human love in its most base and most sublime forms. The written word-- like the enshrouded statue that stands in St. Paul's Cathedral-- was a monument not only to his life but also his love. All of the voices of derision that haunted him during his life now are silent, but his voice lives on-- he has won. For in his corpus, love is embodied, given a sphere where it may exist without interference-- in all of its pure and erotic nuance-- forever incorruptible, immortal.

### Works Consulted



### Primary Works

Coffin, Charles M, ed., The Complete Poetry and Selected Prose of John Donne. New York:

The Modern Library, 2001. This edition is referenced whenever the texts of the poems are quoted unless otherwise indicated.

Donne, John. John Donne Sermons. Online. Brigham Young University. 14 Mar. 2006.

Harold B. Lee Library. Internet. 14 Mar. 2006. Available FTP:

<<http://www.lib.byu.edu/donne/>>.

Oliver, P.M., ed. John Donne Selected Letters. Manchester, Great Britain: Carcanet Press Limited, 2002.

### Secondary Works

Bell, Ilona. "Courting Anne More." In (JDJS.) 19 (2000): 59-87.

Brooks, Cleanth. "The Language of Paradox: 'The Canonization.'" In (CCE.) 100-109.

Canteli, María J. Pando. "The Poetics of Space in Donne's Love Poetry." In (JDJS) 19 (2000): 45-59.

Carey, John. John Donne: Life, Mind and Art. Boston: Faber and Faber. 1981.

Carrithers Jr., Gale H. Donne at Sermons "A Christian Existential World." Albany: State University of New York Press. 1972.

Cathcart, Dwight. Doubting Conscience "Donne and the Poetry of Moral Argument." Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press. 1975.

DiPasquale, Theresa M. "Ambivalent Mourning in 'Since she whome I lovd' In (D. Desire)



183-196.

- " "Literature & Sacrament; The Sacred and the Secular in John Donne." Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press. 1999.
- " "Reading Donne's Epigrams in Sequence: An Introduction." Paper delivered at the Twenty-First Annual John Donne Society Conference. Louisiana State University, Baton Rouge.  
17 February 2006.
- " "Receiving a Sexual Sacrament: 'The Flea' as Prophane Eucharist." In (RL) 81-96. Ellenson, Robert Guffey. "The Logic of Parables in Donne's Preaching." Paper delivered at the Twenty-First Annual John Donne Society Conference. Louisiana State University, Baton Rouge. 18 February 2006.
- Empson, William. 7 Types of Ambiguity "a study of its effects in English verse." New York: Meridian Books, Inc. 1961.
- " Essays on Renaissance Literature Volume One "Donne and the New Philosophy." Edited by John Haffenden. Cambridge University Press. 1993.
- Estrin, Barbara L. "Echoing the Future: Petrarch, Shakespeare, Irigaray and 'A Valediction Forbidding Mourning.'" Paper delivered at the Twenty-First Annual John Donne Society Conference. Louisiana State University, Baton Rouge. 17 February 2006.
- Flynn, Dennis. "Donne and the Uses of Courtliness: Trained to Lie?" In (JDJS) 21 (2002): 231-End.
- " "Donne, Portraiture, and the Portraits of Anne More Donne." Paper delivered at the Twenty-First Annual John Donne Society Conference. Louisiana State University, Baton Rouge. 17 February 2006.

- Frontain, Raymond-Jean, Malpezzi, Frances M. Eds. John Donne's Religious Imagination :  
"Essays in Honor of John T. Shawcross." (RI) Conway, AR: UCA Press. 1995.
- Gardner, Helen. ed. John Donne "A Collection of Critical Essays." (CCE) Englewood Cliffs,  
 N.J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc. 1962.
- " "The Religious Poetry of John Donne." In (CCE.) 123-137.
- Gosse, Edmund. The Life and Letters of John Donne Dean of St. Paul's. 2 Vols. Gloucester,  
 Mass: Peter Smith. 1959.
- Grierson, Herbert J.C. "Donne's Love Poetry." In (CCE.) 13-23.
- Guibbory, Achsah. "Sacramental Poetics in an Age of Controversy." In (JDJS) 21 (2002):  
 225-231.
- " "Fear of 'loving more': Death and the Loss of Sacramental Love." In (D. Desire). 204-  
 228.
- Haskin, Dayton. "On Trying to Make the Record Speak More about Donne's Love Poems."  
 In (D. Desire) 39-66.
- Herek, Bryan. "'Can Railing then cure these worn maladies?': John Donne and the Efficacy of  
 Satire." Paper delivered at the Twenty-First Annual John Donne Society Conference.  
 Louisiana State University, Baton Rouge. 17 February 2006.
- Hester, M. Thomas. "'Fæminæ lectissimæ': Reading Anne Donne." In (D. Desire) 17-35.
- " "The Parallax View: Donne's 'inticing' Letter to Sir George More." Paper delivered at the  
 Twenty-First Annual John Donne Society Conference. Louisiana State University, Baton  
 Rouge. 17 February 2006.
- " ed. John Donne's "desire of more."(D. Desire) "The Subject of Anne More Donne in His  
 Poetry." Newark: University of Delaware Press. 1996.

- " and Young Jr., R.V. Eds. In John Donne Journal Studies in the Age of Donne. (JDJS) 24 Vols. North Carolina State University Press. 1981-2005. Vols. 17, 19, 21.
- Lewis, C.S. "Donne and Love Poetry in the Seventeenth Century." In (CCE.) 90-100.
- Lindley, Arthur. "John Donne, 'Batter my heart,' and English Rape Law." In (JDJS.) 17 (1998): 75-89.
- Marotti, Arthur F. John Donne, Coterie Poet. Madison, Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press. 1986.
- Martz, Louis L. The Action of the Self: Devotional Poetry in the Seventeenth Century, "Metaphysical Poetry." ed. Malcom Bradbury and David Palmer, Stratford Upon-Avon Studies 11 (London: Edward Arnold; New York: St. Martin's Press, 1970)
- Oliver, P.M. Donne's Religious Writing "A Discourse of Feigned Devotion". New York: Addison Wesley Longman. 1997.
- Papazian, Mary A. "Donne's Secular and Sacred Reactions to Loss: From Nothingness to God's Tender Jealousy." Paper delivered at the Twenty-First Annual John Donne Society Conference. Louisiana State University, Baton Rouge. 18 February 2006.
- Sabine, Maureen. "No Marriage in Heaven: John Donne, Anne Donne, and the Kingdom Come." In (D. Desire) 228-256. Newark: University of Delaware Press. 1996.
- Schoenfeldt, Michael. "Eloquent Blood and Body Thoughts: Donne and Corporeality." Paper delivered at the Twenty-First Annual John Donne Society Conference. Louisiana State University, Baton Rouge. 16 February 2006.
- Shami, Jeanne. "Donne, Anti-Jewish Rhetoric, and the English Church in 1621." Paper delivered at the Twenty-First Annual John Donne Society Conference. Louisiana State

University, Baton Rouge. 18 February 2006.

Sherman, Anita Gilman. "Disowning Knowledge in Donne's *Anniversaries*." Paper delivered At the Twenty-First Annual John Donne Society Conference. Louisiana State University, Baton Rouge. 18 February 2006.

Stanwood, P.G. "The Vision of God in the Sonnets of John Donne and George Herbert." In (JDJS). 21 (2002): 89-100.

Tillyard, E.M.W. The Elizabethan World Picture. New York: Vintage Books a division of Random House. No date.

Tuve, Rosemond. Elizabethan and Metaphysical Imagery "Renaissance Poetic and Twentieth Century Critics." Chicago: Phoenix Books, The University of Chicago Press. 1947.

Wall, John N. "John Donne's Apology for the Church of England: The Dedication Sermon at Lincoln's Inn in its Liturgical Contexts." Paper delivered at the Twenty-First Annual John Donne Society Conference. Louisiana State University, Baton Rouge. 18 February 2006.

Young, R.V. "Introduction: *The Poetry of Meditation* and the Aesthetics of Devotional Intention." In (JDJS.) 21 (2002): 1-11.