

Lecture 18: One Donne – Jack & Dr. John

Or: Once a Pagan/Catholic, always a Pagan/Catholic

One of the persistent stereotypes about Donne, suggested by Isaac Walton's schematized Hagiography (Saint's Life) of a reformed sinner— 2 Donnes, a young rake(hell), lover of many women, and a mature, reformed lover of One God. One Done the author of *Songs & Sonnets*, the *Elegies*, etc.; the other of the *Holy Sonnets* & other "Divine Poems."

Persuasive for a number of reasons:

- 1) Conforms to the pattern of a Bildungsroman;
- 2) Reflects our (Puritanical) tendency to isolate spiritual love from sexual desire, agape from eros;
- 3) Seems to offer a "happy ending."

Break down the stereotype by reading one of his love songs as a religious poem (as its title, "The Canonization," sacrilegiously suggests) And one of his Holy Sonnets, "Batter My Heart," as a love poem— both violent and disturbing In order to show that the two Donnes are really one— one powerful, restless, SELF-searching imagination; one consciousness, tortuous and self-torturing, always struggling to find images that might express and somehow define its relation to the OTHER, and to find itself in the love of that OTHER. It's about DESIRE.

Begin with an obviously erotic seduction poem:

THE FLEA

(B 1263)

Mark but this flea, and mark in this,
How little that which thou deniest me is;
Me it sucked first, and now sucks thee,
And in this flea our two bloods mingled be;
Thou know'st that this cannot be said
A sin, or shame, or loss of maidenhead,
Yet this enjoys before it woo,
And pampered swells with one blood made of two,
And this, alas, is more that we would be.

Oh stay, three lives in one flea spare,
Where we almost, nay more than married are.
This flea is you and I, and this
Our marriage bed and marriage temple is;
Though parents grudge, and you, we are met,
And cloistered in these living walls of jet.
Though use make you apt to kill me,
Let not to that, self-murder added be,
And sacrilege, three sins in killing three.

Cruel and sudden, hast thou since
Purpled thy nail in blood of innocence?
Wherein could this flea guilty be,
Except in that drop which it sucked from thee?
Yet thou triumph'st, and say'st that thou
Find'st not thy self nor me the weaker now;

Tis true; then learn how false fears be:
Just so much honor, when thou yield'st to me,
Will waste, as this flea's death took life from thee.
You've already noticed the kind of word-play called double entendre—words with an implicitly sexual second meaning, like the sound-play on *sucking*, and the idea of *swelling* (8) as both pregnancy and sexual arousal. But now look at another kind of double meaning: the playful, almost blasphemous use of religious language. Here's a (slightly strained) example: “one blood made of two” could suggest the mystery of the incarnation, in which two natures, divine and human become one “blood” in the person of Jesus Christ. If your world is suffused with religious imagery, as Donne's was, you are likely to think, or half-think in such terms.

Let's try it: **What potentially religious images/meanings can you find in this stanza?**

Oh stay, three lives in one flea spare,
Where we almost, nay more than married are.
This flea is you and I, and this
Our marriage bed and marriage temple is;
Though parents grudge, and you, we are met,
And cloistered in these living walls of jet.
 Though use make you apt to kill me,
 Let not to that, self-murder added be,
 And sacrilege, three sins in killing three.

Three in one (the Trinity)

marriage temple cloistered sacrilege

Now look at the last stanza:

Cruel and sudden, hast thou since
Purpled thy nail in blood of innocence?
Wherein could this flea guilty be,
Except in that drop which it sucked from thee?
Yet thou triumph'st, and say'st that thou
Find'st not thy self nor me the weaker now;
 Tis true; then learn how false fears be:
 Just so much honor, when thou yield'st to me,
 Will waste, as this flea's death took life from thee.

What religious language do you find in these lines?

Here's a poem in which such language is put to more consequential use, in order to celebrate erotic love as a profoundly spiritual experience: *eros* (physical desire) is also *agape* (pure spiritual love). The very title of the poem, "The Canonization," is potentially blasphemous.

What is a canonization?

As I read through the poem, listen (look) for religious under- and/or over-tones.

THE CANONIZATION

(B 1267-68)

FOR God's sake hold your tongue, and let me love ;
Or chide my palsy, or my gout;
My five gray hairs, or ruin'd fortune flout;
With wealth your state, your mind with arts improve;
Take you a course, get you a place, 5
Observe his Honour, or his Grace;
Or the king's real, or his stamp'd face
Contemplate; what you will, approve,
So you will let me love.

How does Donne characterize the attitudes of those who
object to his love?

Alas! alas! who's injured by my love? 10
What merchant's ships have my sighs drown'd?
Who says my tears have overflow'd his ground?
When did my colds a forward spring remove?
When did the heats which my veins fill
Add one more to the plaguy bill? 15
Soldiers find wars, and lawyers find out still
Litigious men, which quarrels move,
Though she and I do love.

What makes that stanza "anti-Petrarchan"?

Call's what you will, we are made such by love ;
Call her one, me another fly, 20
We're tapers too, and at our own cost die,
And we in us find th' eagle and the dove.
The phoenix riddle hath more wit
By us; we two being one, are it;
So, to one neutral thing both sexes fit. 25
We die and rise the same, and prove
Mysterious by this love.

What is “the phoenix riddle”?
What makes love “mysterious”?

We can die by it, if not live by love,
And if unfit for tomb or hearse
Our legend be, it will be fit for verse; 30
And if no piece of chronicle we prove,
We'll build in sonnets pretty rooms;
As well a well-wrought urn becomes
The greatest ashes, as half-acre tombs,
And by these hymns, all shall approve 35
Us canonized for love;

What inversions of “worldly” attitudes are at work in that stanza? How do *sonnets* (32) become *hymns* (35)? What allows the lovers to become saints, i.e., “canonized”?

The final stanza affirms and elaborates the argument of the poem:

And thus invoke us: “You, whom reverend love
Made one another’s hermitage;
You, to whom love was peace, that now is rage;
Who did the whole world’s soul contract, and drove 40
Into the glasses of your eyes—
So made such mirrors, and such spies,
That they did all to you epitomize—
Countries, towns, courts: Beg from above
A pattern of your love.” 45

Because it speaks powerfully of an Incarnation, & of dying in order to be reborn, “The Canonization” is, in fact, a “religious” poem: certainly a poem about a spiritual quest—as well as a love poem in the more usual sense. Is it a “seduction” poem? Technically it seems more like a celebration of love than an invitation to sexual pleasure. But it surely *is* “seductive” for those who care about poetry and the pleasures of language.

Donne’s more obviously “religious” poems are equally complex and subtle expressions of DESIRE; they are charged with the same restless passion. The desire is arguably *more* intense because its object is no longer finite and because it holds out the promise of absorbing the SELF in the OTHER.

Here is one famous example:

HOLY SONNET XIV (or 10) (B 1297-98)

Batter my heart, three-person'd God; for you
As yet but knock, breathe, shine, and seek to mend;
That I may rise, and stand, o'erthrow me, and bend
Your force, to break, blow, burn, and make me new. 4
I, like an usurp'd town, to another due,
Labour to admit you, but O, to no end.
Reason, your viceroy in me, me should defend,
But is captived, and proves weak or untrue. 8
Yet dearly I love you, and would be loved fain,
But am betroth'd unto your enemy;
Divorce me, untie, or break that knot again,
Take me to you, imprison me, for I, 12
Except you enthrall me, never shall be free,
Nor ever chaste, except you ravish me.

The poem is built on a series of religious—and sexual—paradoxes. What are they?

Here, in case I have time left, is another poem that uses outrageous and offensive erotic imagery to explore the depths of religious passion.

HOLY SONNET XVIII (or 14) (B 1297-98)

Show me, dear Christ, thy so bright and clear.
What! is it she which on the other shore
Goes richly painted? or which, robbed and tore,
Laments and mourns in Germany and here? 4
Sleeps she a thousand, then peeps up one year?
Is she self-truth, and errs? Now new, now outwore?
Doth she, and did she, and shall she evermore
On one, on seven, or on no hill appear? 8
Dwells she with us, or like adventuring knights
First travel we to seek, and then make love?
Betray, kind husband, thy spouse to our sights,
And let mine amorous soul court thy mild dove, 12
Who is most true and pleasing to thee then
When she is embraced and open to most men.

What on earth is happening here? Why?