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### Sexual Language as a Sign of Devotion in John Donne's "Batter My Heart"

A high level of sexuality is inarguably a common and, more often than not, dominant trait of John Donne's poetry. Donne's earlier works address love in a manner that is witty and playful yet laden with sexuality; in these poems Donne's persona is that of a young, reckless "Jack" Donne (Ruffleth, Ernest). Arguing in favor of physical love in "The Flea," for example, Donne tells his mistress that the flea, having bitten them both, "swells with one blood made of two,/And this, alas, is more than [they] would do" (Lines 8-9). Donne's statement that the flea "swells with one blood" refers to the woman swelling from a pregnancy "made [by] two" and, as Wisam Mansour states it, "sadly indicates that the flea can do more than he can do"; yet because Donne addresses physical love through the medium of the flea, he is able to maintain a light tenor in his approach (8). Sometimes, he abruptly and unexpectedly turns from a discussion of philosophical love to physical love, such as in "The Good Morrow": he moves from the cartography metaphor of the "two...hemispheres," meaning him and his mistress, in line 17 to the sexual metaphor of death, meaning orgasm, in lines 19 and 21. Even here, his use of metaphors rather than blatant sexual language again sustains the playful mood. Donne's latter poetry presents a distinct shift to more religious, devotional subjects—Donne's persona becomes that of "Dr. John" Donne (Ruffleth, Ernest). Even with religious subject matter, Donne still evokes strongly sexual language, especially when

discussing the relationship that he desires to have with God. In contrast to his lighthearted attitude toward love in his earlier poems, Donne uses blunt, aggressive language to mark his more sober, serious contemplation of religion; and the “intensity of [his] religious ardor [is] expressed by [his] expansion of the boundaries of metaphorical usage” through such language (Payne 210). In *Holy Sonnet XIV*, “Batter My Heart,” John Donne employs the sexual language typical of his style but also utilizes harsh, forceful language; and though unorthodox, he uses this speech in his devotional poem to illustrate the strength of his faith.

The first three words of Donne’s sonnet, “Batter my heart,” set the powerful tones of conquest and submission that are a major theme of the work (Line 1). In his article “Donne’s HOLY SONNET XIV,” Tunis Romein expounds upon this “controlling idea of the poem,” stating that Donne “must be acted upon violently before he can be spiritually reborn” (13). Donne commences his explanation of this bold request in saying to “three-personed God,” “[Y]ou/As yet but knock, breath, shine, and seek to mend”; Donne subsequently urges God, “[B]end/Your force to break, blow, burn, and make me new” (Lines 1-2, 3-4). According to John Baxter, by addressing “three-personed God,” Donne indicates different “operations of each of the persons: the Father knocks, the Spirit breathes, the Son shines” (93). Donne conveys his desire for God to fight for him, to forcibly take what belongs to Him. The harsh alliteration and the roughness of the action words in line 4 particularly illustrate the bluntness and force that Donne asks of God. The roughness stands in bold relief when contrasted with the actions of line 2: rather than knock, God must break him; the Spirit must not simply breathe, but blow; the Son must burn him, not merely shine on him. Ultimately, this three-personed God must

forsake to mend him and instead make him entirely new. Donne regards “the heart itself as the peril—not a thing to be mended or repaired or cleansed but a thing to be re-done” (92). In this bold language, Donne makes it clear that he does not want a loving, patient God but instead an angry, jealous God Who, rather than guides, takes control and makes His presence both known and felt. Donne truly invokes the tone of conquest by asking God to “o’erthrow” him so that he “may rise and stand” (Line 3). The oxymoron of wanting to be overthrown in order to “rise and stand” bespeaks Donne’s desperation for God’s intervention. The only way that he may prevail is to first be subdued by God and then rebuilt and “made new” by His strength. In the first quatrain, Donne only entreats God to conquer his heart; in another display of his urgency, he next wishes for God to conquer him entirely.

Donne further explains his request for God to “batter his heart” in the second quatrain when he admits his own weakness: “I, like an usurped town, to’ another due,/Labour to’ admit you; but oh, to no end” (5-6). Donne finally reveals his struggle, the basis for his appeal to God: though he strives to give himself to God, he cannot because he is already “to’ another due.” He knows that he has failed in his faith and has turned away from God, which is why he pleads for God to actively pursue him. Donne also reveals that he is “not in a position of power...but is subjected” (Ruf 306). Donne uses the language of conquest again and introduces the sexual theme of submission, describing himself as “an usurped town” and invoking the image of being sexually, not just spiritually, conquered. Donne’s description clearly conveys that he has been conquered by one other than God.

Continuing with the theme of his own subjection, Donne states that “Reason is [God’s] viceroy” in him and so “should defend [him],/But is captive, and proves weak or untrue” (Lines 7-8). In his criticism of reason, Donne implies a conquest of the mind in addition to a conquest of the body. He depicts reason as one’s conscience, which in religious tradition is the Holy Spirit within oneself. Again recalling Donne’s request in line 1, he addresses his “three-personed God” and in doing so indicates the Trinity: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. In conjunction with the title “three-personed,” the naming of reason as God’s “viceroy” or ruler in man reiterates the idea of the Holy Spirit as one’s conscience. Author Craig Payne states that by calling reason “weak or untrue,” Donne “takes the position that reason, though the highest faculty and God’s ‘viceroy’ in humanity, is incomplete and flawed” (211). Donne makes his frustration with his own weakness apparent; however, when Donne subsequently states in a critical tone that reason should defend him, implying even more critically that reason failed to do so, he appears to blame reason for this weakness.

Donne quickly shifts from his mild attack and endeavors to temper his speech by telling God, “Yet dearly’ I love you, and would be loved fain” (Line 9). While he loses the overt forceful edge that he has maintained thus far in his supplications, he gains a more subtle, though equally strong, fervor in its place. Rather than restating his desire to be overthrown or conquered, he “would be loved fain.” Donne’s introduction of love, though not romantic in this instance, triggers his use of romantic language in describing his relationship with God. Now stating who has led to his subjection, Donne confesses, “[I] am betrothed unto your enemy” (10). By invoking the image of marriage, Donne creates a romantic relationship between himself and God; even further, he creates within that

relationship a “love triangle” among himself, God, and God’s “enemy,” Satan, in which Donne “puts himself in the female role” (Rufleth, Ernest). Payne states that “the soul is typically feminine in Elizabethan poetry,” lending even more credence to the idea of Donne’s assumption of the female role (211). Donne forms a contrast to the biblical idea of the bride of Christ by “subconsciously associat[ing] himself with the female” role and depicting himself instead as the “bride of Satan” (*Holy Bible, New International Version*, Rev. 19:7; Mansour 8). With the metaphor of marriage now in place, Donne returns to his aggressive appeals to God and to the sensual language with which he previously described his subjected state.

As bluntly as with his first three words, Donne calls on God to save him from this betrothal to Satan, begging, “Divorce me’, untie, or break that knot again,/Take me to you, imprison me” (Lines 11-12). As stated earlier by Payne, the force of his words illustrates the “intensity of Donne’s religious ardor”; yet these words also begin a series of paradoxes, the first of which is Donne’s request for God to divorce him. Following New Testament scripture, according to the command of the Lord, a “wife must not separate from her husband” (*Holy Bible, New International Version*, I Cor. 7:10). Thus, Donne’s first paradox is that he is requesting the Lord to go against His own commands to save Donne from the enemy; Donne, having placed himself in the role of a wife, is also planning to deliberately disobey the Lord’s commands by separating from the husband, Satan. The Old Testament offers a different but equally difficult paradox for Donne, stating that a man who “finds something indecent” about his wife may write “her a certificate of divorce, [give] it to her and [send] her from his house” (Deut. 24:1). While the latter scripture allows for a divorce, Donne is still trapped because of his assumed

female role and so cannot effect the divorce himself, sustaining the necessity of God's intervention. Both instances, however, illustrate the utter conquest and subjection of Donne by the enemy. Further into the paradox, Donne is asking God to divorce him from God's own enemy. If God leaves Donne in this marriage, pursuant to His own commands about divorce, as a result, He cannot deliver Donne from his enemies, pursuant to His own Word (Ps. 18:48). Donne's willingness to make such a petition of God clearly demonstrates his desperation for and trust in God to reclaim control of him. He addresses God "regarding such intimate matters that the relationship it assumes must be intimate as well" (Ruf 306). This intimacy deepens even further when Donne finally gives his furious desire for reclamation an unrestrained voice and distinctly shifts his relationship with God, as well as the language of his pleas to God, from romantic to sensual.

As he seemingly grows more despondent with the hopelessness of his capture by the "enemy" Satan, Donne's speech adopts a converse level of energy from its new sexual charge. In his final entreaty, he beseeches God, "[F]or I,/Except you' enthral me, never shall be free,/Nor ever chaste, except you ravish me" (Lines 12-14). Unlike previous instances, Donne uses neither subtlety nor innuendo in his blatant request for a sexual, though ultimately sanctifying, conquest. Just as with his plea to be overthrown so that he may rise, Donne's requests in the last two lines create "violent paradoxes" (Baxter 93). Donne first argues that only through being enslaved by God can he be free. While he would be newly enslaved to God, he would now be free from the enemy, Satan. Donne repeats this "language of romantic passion...and intellectual paradox" with an even stronger image, that of "Divine Rape" (Payne 210). Contrasted with the

earlier examined uses of the sexual metaphor in "The Flea," Donne's appeal to God in "Batter My Heart" to "ravish" him evokes a sedate and humorless atmosphere. The strength of his language directly relays the strength and sincerity of his plea. Donne's belief that only a Divine Rape can make him clean and "chaste" displays both his conviction of his own impurity and his confidence in God's purity and holiness, and his increasingly bold language uniquely illustrates his increasing desire to also reflect that purity and holiness.

In looking at the form of Donne's sonnet, his use of forward language becomes even more apparent as his statements are grouped together. In the first quatrain, Donne plays heavily on alliteration, beginning in line 1 with "batter" and continuing in line 4 with "break, blow, burn." This quatrain presents Donne's "prayerful pleading" for God's help and the ways in which he feels that he can be saved (Payne 211). In stating the radical measures that Donne believes need to be taken to save him, the sonnet takes on "the voice of a friend in despair" (Ruf 307). The second quatrain exposes the reason for Donne's drastic supplications: left vulnerable by a "weak or untrue" reason, he is now "captived" and "to' another due." Taken together, in these lines Donne appears to not only blame reason for his "usurped" state but also excuse himself from liability by assuming the position of the victim. Because he describes his captivity by another despite his efforts to "admit" God and then immediately criticizes reason, God's representative in him, for its weakness, Donne conveys the idea that he was unsuccessful in admitting God because of the faultiness of reason.

With the use of the contradicting word "yet," Donne creates the traditional shift in the third quatrain from the futility of his attempts to admit God back to the necessity of

God's intervention; Donne demonstrates, according to scholar Antony F. Bellette, an "agility of logical shifts from quatrain to quatrain" as he moves between what he desires God to do and what he himself cannot do (326). He is now not just "captived" but completely subjected by being "betrothed" to Satan, requiring God to intercede and "divorce" him from the enemy. Yet Donne does not want God just to save him from the enemy; he wants God to then "take" him and "imprison" him for His own. Donne moves from a plea for salvation from Satan's subjection to one for God's subjection of him, again entering into the "juxtaposition of sharply conflicting elements" which he employed in the first quatrain (326). His entreaty to God, reiterated time and time again throughout the poem, reaches its zenith in the final couplet when Donne invokes the most violent of his paradoxes.

Donne posits in the last two lines that only through God's enslaving him can he free and only in being ravished can he be chaste. As the "urgency of [Donne's] exhortation" grows, the violence of his language grows in proportion (Bellette 330). He begins wanting God to batter his heart but ends asking for a full physical conquest. Compared with "The Good Morrow," in which Donne suddenly leaps to physical love and sexual language, the language of sexual conquest in the final couplet of "Batter My Heart" is the result of a gradual move toward this subject, from the first mention of love to a more romantic love and then to a sensual love. By masking the sexual language in metaphors in "The Good Morrow," Donne lessens the suddenness of the shift to that language. Because Donne uses blunt sexual language in "Batter My Heart," especially the forceful words "enthrall" and "ravish," this transition, though indicative of Donne's fervor and more serious discussion, is more shocking. The couplet does not bring the



traditional resolution of the problem of his need for God to fight for him. Through Donne's use of contradictory words, the poem's "forward progression is repeatedly checked by the 'yet,' 'but,' 'except' sequence which seems to make every thought double back on itself" (330). Thus, instead of resolving the problem, the couplet brings the steadily mounting aggression of Donne's request to a head and offers God the only possibility for his salvation.

John Donne's latter poetry marks a pointed move from lighter, more flippant poetry to sober and genuine contemplations of religion and faith; yet in his later works, Donne maintains the sexual tone for which he is known. However, in contrast to discussing philosophical and physical love, Donne employs sexual language as a means to convey the substance, vigor, and depth of his faith. Rather than detracting from his declaration of his desire to be saved, the sexuality of Donne's poetry reveals the sincerity of his knowledge in his own depravity without God. Donne expresses his unwavering confidence in the salvation which God brings, believing that his defeat at the hands of God will make him victorious, that such an encounter as Divine Rape, and only such an encounter, will renew him and make him chaste.

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