

Carol Student

ENGL 3000

Dr. J. Comas

29 April 2016

“Batter *My* Heart”

Considering the Reader’s Response to Holy Sonnet XIV

Can a sonnet written some four-hundred years ago by a womanizer-turned-preacher who was conflicted about marriage and preferred “the idea of a woman” to actual women and who reveled in crafting a clever paradox or a shocking metaphor for its own sake have anything significant to say to us today? Why does John Donne’s Holy Sonnet XIV remain a fixture in the literary canon? Why do we still study and write about it? After the critics have analyzed its themes, its imagery, its structure, its figures, its conceits, its tone, its quality, its ideology, its context—and they have—what more is there to say? As Ronald Corthell notes in his introduction to *Ideology and Desire in Renaissance Poetry: The Subject of Donne*, “Donne has been done and undone. Should we be done with him?” (11).

I say not just yet. Not only does Holy Sonnet XIV serve as a fine example of the artful and effective use of metaphysical conceits, it also demonstrates how Donne’s daring treatment of spiritual intimacy stretched the boundaries of the sonnet’s thematic conventions. Furthermore, the synergistic effect of all the elements of the poem generates a response in the reader. Each successive generation that reads Donne has the potential to make new meaning from his ancient text as the reader engages with his work in the context of her own experience, education, worldview, community, gender, psychology, sexual orientation, political climate, religious

beliefs, and socio-economic status. Writing about reader-response criticism in her book *Critical Theory Today: A user-friendly guide*, Lois Tyson points out that “a written text is not an object, despite its physical existence, but an *event* that occurs within the reader, whose response is of primary importance in creating the text” (164, emphasis added).

Reading Holy Sonnet XIV is most definitely an event, and an action-packed one at that. It is a violent love-suit that demands the striking of a barred gate by a mighty battering ram. It is a battle being waged to recapture a lost city. It is a scene of treachery and betrayal and an impending forced marriage to an enemy. It is a cry of confession and a plea for rescue. It is the desperate prayer of an addict who can't stop using, the agonized appeal of an alcoholic who can't stop drinking, and the shame-filled supplication of the sinner who can't stop sinning. Holy Sonnet XIV impels us to *identify*, and criticism that fails to consider the importance of this aspect misses the extravagance of this poem.

For instance, in an article entitled “Donne's Adulterous Female Town,” William R. Mueller proposes that, to be fully appreciated, Donne's Holy Sonnet XIV must be viewed and understood through the lens of biblical imagery.

He cites passages from both the Old and New Testaments to establish that the heart referred to in the first line of the sonnet—“Batter my *heart*” (emphasis added)—represents the “whole inner life or character of the human being” (312). He notes that God's movement toward the speaker has not been forceful enough to gain victory over his heart. “The Trinity,” he says, “has merely sought to mend the damaged heart but has not yet fashioned a new life, a new being” (313). The speaker would have God “woo him more violently” (312).

Mueller identifies the “central images of the sonnet” as war and marriage and notes that “the key to the meaning of the imagery is the Bible” (313). To illuminate this imagery, Mueller points out that the Old Testament prophets frequently confronted cities, communities, and the whole nation of Israel by equating their wrongdoings with infidelity to God, the consequence of which was often takeover by foreign powers. In such instances, the prophet referred to the community as female, the wife, and God as the husband. The Book of Hosea serves as Mueller’s prime example of a biblical analogy in which marital adultery on the part of a wife provides a fitting image of the nation of Israel’s “defection” from God (314). Mueller also notes that in Donne’s own time (and even in his own poetry), femininity was attributed to states and masculinity to rulers.

Mueller’s opinion is that Donne should be identified with the speaker in the sonnet, and thus, he concludes:

Donne’s comparison of himself with an adulterous female town is a part of his biblical heritage. He, like Israel, had broken the covenant and betrayed God’s love. His sonnet pleads for a renewal of the saving covenant through which, paradoxically, man’s freedom lies in his bondage to God, his chastity in his ravishment by God. (314)

Mueller’s points are all true: the scriptures are full of imagery depicting the Hebrew god Yahweh’s people as his bride, and when they worshipped other gods they were called, collectively, a harlot who “went a whoring after false gods” (Mueller, 313); their unfaithfulness usually ended up with them defeated in a war and enslaved to a foreign power. The Bible is clearly the literature to which Donne’s war and marriage images allude. I agree that a basic

understanding of the sonnet is more readily accessible to that reader who is familiar with biblical imagery. One who is not will benefit from decoding the biblical allusions. In the same way that Byron's "Manfred" is informed by Zoroastrianism and Coleridge's poetry by Kantian philosophy, the images in Donne's sonnet are deeply rooted in biblical literature and the Christian tradition. However, many of Mueller's statements are abrupt and presuppose agreement on the part of the reader.

Furthermore, Mueller has presented information, but he has not invited participation. He ostensibly sets out to heighten appreciation, as his opening statement indicates, but if anything, he has diminished it by removing the imagery even further into antiquity and depersonalizing it as collective without offering any balancing element that tells us why we should care. By failing to engage the reader's response to the poem, he renders his points, however factual, dry, dusty, and remote. Not until the concluding sentence of the article does he in any way universalize the theme he has sought to illuminate throughout, but even then it seems unintentional.

In *Gender and the Sacred Self in John Donne*, Elizabeth M. A. Hodgson sets out to examine Donne's "struggle to define his own gendered soul" (14). While Donne's secular poetry seems easily to entertain the paradox of male empowerment achieved via the "bonds" of a female lover, his sacred texts by contrast manifest some difficulty in entering the "bonds of a feminine subjectivity" (13) and reveal a sense "that the masculinity of the speaker may be something of a spiritual liability" (13). Hodgson asserts that "an important dynamic in Donne's sacred work" is his "strategic adoption of certain culturally feminine roles and qualities in service of what is, finally, a project of masculine self-construction" (13). She argues that Donne, ever in pursuit of "spiritual self-definition" (15), is fascinated with the "dangers and benefits of

the freeing bondage of the feminine (and the binding freedoms of the masculine)” (14). Donne’s recurrent metaphors (especially the “criminal/prisoner bride” that appears in Holy Sonnet XIV and elsewhere) represent “core questions about his gendered identity as man, poet, and priest” (15).

Hodgson posits that Donne’s exploration of the feminine aspect of self reflects a historical, political, and religious dynamic at play in seventeenth century European culture. She likewise considers the differences between Donne’s engagement with the feminine gender as a philosophical abstraction and actual women as they were regarded and treated in society (and by Donne himself). She builds a case for distinguishing between the gender-obliviation/ hermaphroditic oneness of sexual union that Donne elevates on the one hand and the persistent cultural/theological view of women as inferior to and less valuable than men to which he adhered on the other, citing Donne’s own words as evidence. She also points out that Donne seems ambivalent about the institution of marriage itself.

Examining the Holy Sonnets in her chapter on marriage, Hodgson proposes that they deal with “the question of erotically spiritual submission, hierarchy, and union. Donne’s sonnets display, in other words, an explicit dynamic of desire for marital intimacy with the godhead” (102, 103). In her treatment of “Batter My Heart” specifically, she discusses the shifting gender of the speaker as evidence that Donne is reluctant to identify himself “with the figure of the criminal/prisoner bride” (103). She further points out that the mention of the “three-personed God” in the opening line refers to the “traditional exegetical argument” (103) that Adam was created by the Trinity and was therefore superior to Eve, who was created by just one member. The speaker’s demands for God to act upon him violently arise from his dismay that

God has not done so; Hodgson suggests that the speaker fears God is as weak and false as the captive faculty of reason.

Hodgson cites the combination of the conventions of the sonnet form (with its typically masculine speaker), the progressive frequency of first-person pronouns, and the assertive tone of the speaker as a “deliberately masculinized labeling of the speaker’s voice” (105). It is a voice that is at odds with “the voice of the frail and untrustworthy bride also present in the imagery of the sonnet” (105). The bride is important as a representation of Donne’s conception of “spiritual intimacy with God” (105), but the point Hodgson makes is that the poem reveals Donne’s anxiety “about the paradoxical power of feminized weakness and vulnerability” (105).

Ultimately, Hodgson argues that “Batter My Heart,” and other sacred texts related to marriage, reveal Donne’s own internal conflict: his traditional view of women, his ambivalence about the institution of marriage, and his fear of a “loss of the masculine self in marriage” versus his “attempts to formulate a gendered self, a self-representation, which will save him” (111). Thus, Hodgson concludes, “Marriage (to brides or as the Bride of Christ) is for him ‘joyes bonfire,’ a resistless force whose consuming power he both desires and fears” (112).

Here Hodgson has given us a great deal of insight about John Donne and his gender conflicts. She provides convincing contextual evidence that such conflicts are representative of his age and that he, through his influence and writings, both explored and helped to perpetuate them. This argument is important because literary engagement with gender archetypes directly impacts the culture. Her arguments are well reasoned and substantiated by significant evidence from Donne’s body of work.

However, her proposal that the speaker's voice in Holy Sonnet XIV is "deliberately masculinized" and reveals anxiety "about the paradoxical power of feminized weakness and vulnerability" (105) undercuts the mysterious nature of spiritual union with God that Donne seeks through this poem. First of all, by improvising on the sonnet form to explore the theme of *agape* love, Donne has already disrupted the thematic conventions; hence, Hodgson's citation of the conventions as evidence of the masculine voice is questionable. Additionally, Donne has inverted the conventional role of the speaker: rather than the lover wooing, he begs to be wooed. Here again, he casts the gender of the speaker into the ambiguity that accompanies the mystery of spiritual union with God. Furthermore, Donne's employment of paradox ripples out from the center of the sonnet in concentric circles that contain ever more complex layers of meaning, not the least of which seeks purity in the act of being raped—a trope that hinges on the speaker's penetration by God, an essentially feminine position.

More significantly, Donne believed that gender disappears and oneness is achieved in the act of sexual union; the transcendence of gender in the act of sex is a spiritual mystery. The ending of "The Canonization" expresses his view of this gender-neutrality in explicit terms.

The phoenix riddle hath more wit
 By us; we two, being one, are it.
 So to one neutral thing both sexes fit,
 We die and rise the same, and prove
 Mysterious by this love. (Lines 23-27)

While Donne is referring to sexual intercourse with a woman, the phoenix to which he likens their union has Christian connotations and symbolizes immortality. We can extrapolate this view of sexual union to mean essentially the same thing in Holy Sonnet XIV.

Donne's passionate plea to be broken, imprisoned, and ravished sounds neither definitively gendered nor anxious. Rather, it sounds like the end of the line for one whose concerted efforts to attain righteousness have availed him nothing, who is on the brink of collapse, and whose only hope is for a rescue that originates outside the self.

In this regard, though Mueller did not cite this biblical allusion, Donne's sonnet echoes the words of Paul in the book of Romans:

I am carnal, sold under sin. For that which I do I allow not: for what I would, that do I not; but what I hate, that do I. . . . for to will is present with me; but how to perform that which is good I find not. For the good that I would I do not: but the evil which I would not, that I do. . . . O wretched man that I am! Who shall deliver me from the body of this death? (KJV, Rom. 7:14, 15, 18, 19, 24)

It likewise alludes to the tradition of confessional spiritual autobiography, originated by Saint Augustine's *Confessions*. Again, to discount the universality of Donne's theme by narrowly focusing on Donne the man is to do a disservice to this work.

To give a thoroughly modern example, I refer to the literature of Alcoholics Anonymous, which, through its Twelve Step program of recovery, has helped millions of people worldwide gain sobriety; AA has been called the most significant spiritual movement of the twentieth century. Its main premise is paradoxical: one cannot stop drinking until one accepts that one cannot stop drinking. Note how the first three of the Twelve Steps echo Donne's sentiments:

1. We admitted we were powerless over alcohol—that our lives had become unmanageable.
2. Came to believe that a Power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity.
3. Made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God *as we understood Him*. (*Alcoholics Anonymous*, 59)

I refer once more to Tyson's exposition of reader-response theory, which "maintains that what a text is cannot be separated from what it does" (162). What Donne's text does is spark a flash of recognition, an identification on the part of the reader (regardless of gender), that keeps Holy Sonnet XIV relevant. Any reader who has been enslaved to an addiction or, despite her best efforts, failed to eradicate some self-defeating behavior, will recognize Donne's struggle—"I, like an usurped town, to another due, / Labor to admit You, but Oh, to no end!" (lines 5, 6)—as her own.

I turn now to the arguments of Clements and Parish, as the two take a similar approach in interpreting the sonnet through its structure and figures. Arthur L. Clements, in his article "Donne's Holy Sonnet XIV," takes on Donne's use of paradox and metaphor as key to interpreting the work. He begins by refuting the arguments of earlier critics George Knox and George Herman, which maintain that the members of the Trinity operate separately in the actions of the poem. While the words *knock*, *breathe*, *shine* and *break*, *blow*, *burn* might reasonably be associated with particular members of the Trinity (i.e., *knock* with God the Father, *breathe* with the Holy Spirit, *shine* with the Son, etc.) as Knox and Herman suggest, Clements argues that an examination of biblical uses of the terms reveals "that each of the other Persons is 'involved' in

the activity of any one” (484, 485). Thus, he proposes that the paradoxical nature of the Trinity itself “is operative as such in the poem” (485) and thereby contributes to its meaning. He devotes a significant portion of his article to supporting this interactivity of the members of the Trinity with several examples from scripture in which each may be associated with all the actions Donne names. Clements finds this significant for two reasons: one is that “profound paradox and the consequent greater complexity of the poem are characteristic of Donne” (487); and two is that the power of the poem derives from “the triple strength of the Three Persons acting as one, with true trinitarian force, [which] is required to raise Donne from his deeply sinful life and hence to effect his salvation” (487).

He further acknowledges that “recognizing the full implications” (487) of the verbs also affects one’s view of the sonnet’s structure. Rather than the three quatrains Knox and Herman proposed, each dealing with one of the three members of the Trinity, the sonnet is unified around “death and rebirth, the central paradox of Christianity” (487). Likewise, the metaphorical language of war and marriage (opposites and therefore paradoxical figures, by Clements’ reckoning) both “operate *throughout the sonnet*” (487, emphasis in original), so that its formal conventions support and underscore the meaning and theme of the poem.

“Throughout the sonnet there has been this paradox of destroying in order to make whole, of throwing down in order to raise, expressed by the two basic kinds of figurative language,” Clements notes (489). Citing the double (and sometimes contradictory) meanings of key words and their placement within the structure of the work, Clements shows how the sonnet ultimately resolves in the sestet by “fusing or uniting” the martial and marital metaphors that had formerly

been juxtaposed, so that in the end they “achieve between themselves what Donne wishes to achieve with God” (489).

“No. 14 of Donne’s Holy Sonnets” by John E. Parish aims to clarify Clements’ argument by showing “how the interlocking of the various metaphors and of the stanzaic divisions gives the sonnet its unity” (300). In contrast to Hodgson, who suggests that the shifting viewpoint is reflective of Donne’s reluctance to identify with the “criminal/prisoner bride” (103), Parish claims that a “shifting viewpoint” (300) unifies the sonnet by showing God “boring from the outside into the very center of the human heart” (300). The first quatrain shows God outside the walled city of the sinner’s heart where a military assault will be required to gain entry. The second shows the “lamentable state of affairs” within the “usurped town” (300), where Reason (which Parish characterizes as a princess) has become bound in marriage to her captor. Parish explains that the phrase “*usurpt town [sic]*” is “deliberately ambiguous and transitional, connecting the first and second quatrains. It refers back to the walled town, of course; but simultaneously it designates the wretched people within the town” (300, 301). The “people” of the town give voice to the prayer of the second quatrain. In the sestet, the voice of the “captive Princess” (301) herself (the “very center” of the heart into which God has been boring) at last pleads for her deliverance and purification, paradoxically to be achieved by being imprisoned and ravished by God, the conquering King and lover.

Parish believes that Donne’s “personification” of the town as a woman serves to “invigorate and unify the prayer” (300) as well as to reflect conventional beliefs about the universal femininity of the soul. Finally, Parish notes that Donne’s “marriage” (302) of two worn-out metaphors [“the castle-body and the princess-soul” (301) joined with the cold mistress

as a castle and her lover the general of a besieging army (302)] produced “an abnormally vigorous offspring, a sonnet in which Donne, with his accustomed daring, requires the reader to see God wearing (with a difference) the rue of a Petrarchan lover” (302).

Explicating the metaphors and paradoxes of the sonnet as Clements and Parish do brings their arguments closer to my own, which emphasizes the reader’s identification and response. Understanding how the conventions work together to reinforce the meaning of the poem can provide a key to unlock additional layers of meaning as well as foster an appreciation of craft, as Clements points out in relation to the paradoxical nature of the Trinity operating as paradox in the Petrarchan structure as well as in the theme of the poem. Similarly, the “paradox of destroying in order to make whole, of throwing down in order to raise, expressed by the two basic kinds of figurative language” (Clements, 489) illustrates how the conceits of the genre make meaning for the reader. Harmon’s *A Handbook To Literature* notes, “When a metaphysical conceit strikes from our minds the same spark of recognition that the poet experienced . . . it speaks to both our minds and our emotions with force” (296).

One aspect of the poem I find important that none of the critics I have cited address as such is the first-person speaker. By and large, scholars agree that Donne himself is the speaker in the poem. I further submit that his choice to adopt the first-person point of view indicates where the author intends the reader to place his or her identification. The deictic pronoun “I” has, as its referent, the person saying it. Even though we know that when Donne wrote the sonnet, the “I” referred to himself as the one giving utterance to these words, when we read it, at least on some level of consciousness, we associate the words *I* and *my* with ourselves. “Batter *my* heart . . .,” we read. “[B]reak, blow, burn, and make *me* new” (Lines 1, 4, emphasis added). How can one

read Holy Sonnet XIV and not give at least some consideration of it in terms of oneself? Hodgson and Mueller prove that Donne's sonnet tells us something important about him; Clements and Parish prove that the structure and figures he used are essential to the poem's meaning. But to what end? The accumulation of knowledge? Certainly. The establishment of historical context? Absolutely. The identification of cultural implications? Positively. The understanding and appreciation of literary form and structure? Definitely. But I submit that the very pragmatics of construction, not to mention the subject matter, direct us toward a deeper spiritual meaning that seeks to involve us personally.

All the elements of Donne's Holy Sonnet XIV combine to produce a strong effect upon the reader—certainly upon *this* reader—which I submit is one reason it remains entrenched in the literary canon. I wish to put forth the idea that the study of Donne's Holy Sonnet XIV ought to include an acknowledgement and exploration of its effect upon the reader. I agree that we should ferret out the intricacies of its construction, figures, and implications, as I have sought to do, but my central purpose and aim in doing so is to encourage engagement with Donne and his Holy Sonnet as they speak to the reader in the present.

Works Cited

- Alcoholics Anonymous*. 3rd ed. New York: Alcoholics Anonymous World Services, Inc.
- Clements, Arthur L. "Donne's Holy Sonnet XIV." *Modern Language Notes* 76.6 (1961): 484–489. Web. 7 April 2016.
- Corthell, Ronald. *Ideology and Desire in Renaissance Poetry: The Subject of Donne*. Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1997. Print.

Donne, John. “[Batter my heart, three-personed God],” “The Canonization.” *The Norton Introduction to Literature*. 9th ed. Ed. Alison Booth, J. Paul Hunter, and Kelly J. Mays. New York: Norton, 2005. 950, 951. Print.

Harmon, William. *A Handbook To Literature*. 12th ed. Boston: Longman, 2012. Print

Hodgson, Elizabeth M. A. *Gender and the Sacred Self in John Donne*. London: Associated University Presses, 1999. Print.

King James Version. Bible Gateway. Web. 28 April 2016.

Mueller, William R. “Donne's Adulterous Female Town”. *Modern Language Notes* 76.4 (1961): 312–314. Web. 7 April 2016.

Parish, John E. “No. 14 of Donne's Holy Sonnets”. *College English* 24.4 (1963): 299–302. Web. 7 April 2016.

Tyson, Lois. *Critical Theory Today: A user-friendly guide*. 3rd ed. London: Routledge, 2015. Print.

GRADE: A

The paper is superb in showing readers that you have (1) a deep understanding of Donne's sonnet, (2) an excellent understanding of a range of scholarship on the poem, and (3) an awareness of larger, theoretical considerations of studying literature (viz., reader-response criticism). The only weak portion of the paper is your assessment of Mueller's article, which is too general and unsubstantiated to be effective (as I mentioned in my marginal note). Another portion, your concluding section on “identification,” though not weak, needs further development. Its current brief length gives it the appearance of an afterthought, which of course

it is not. This is one of the smartest undergraduate papers I've read; in fact, it is better than many graduate papers I've had to read. Thanks for giving me such a great paper!

The department gives an annual award to the best paper in our upper-division courses; and I think you should consider entering this paper, especially if you develop your discussion of "identification." Along those lines, I'm going to send you the opening pages of Kenneth Burke's *A Rhetoric of Motives*, where he introduces his conception of "identification" beginning with a reading of Milton's *Sampson Agonistes*.