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"England's Second Austine": John Donne's Resistance to Conversion

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Donne's life and writings are often taken as reflections of each other, a practice begun by his first biographer Izaak Walton, who found it natural to place Donne's lyrics (and even one of George Herbert's) in the *Life of Donne* to illustrate episodes in the poet's life. Donne himself was the first to exploit this strategy and, even though we are far less critically naive than Walton regarding most of Donne's oeuvre, the poet's own rhetorical and self-interested interpretation of his life and works continues to exert an authoritative influence on our reading of one particular group of poems. In the period leading up to his ordination in 1615 and for some time afterwards, Donne repeatedly renounces certain literary practices to demonstrate that the change in his profession from client and courtier to priest marked the completion of a religious conversion. In his letters, he signifies a dignified assumption of his new profession by distancing himself from his secular, often courtly and Petrarchan works and, in his devotional poetry, he renounces his former poetic "idolatry" in a new attitude of prayerful repentance. In the Divine Poems, Donne becomes "England's second Austine," in Walton's phrase, and no longer another English poet singing of "poore Petrarch's long deceased woes."[1] We assume that Donne's conversion changed him from a Petrarchan poet to an Anglican priest, and that these are mutually exclusive categories. Donne's representation of his religious conversion, however, is complicated—not simply demonstrated—by the renunciations of his role as a Petrarchan poet.

Let us take Holy Sonnet 3, "O might those sighs and tears return again," as a brief example of how slippery Donne's representation of himself as a reformed Petrarchan poet can be. In the sonnet, Donne repudiates an "idolatry" that he clearly associates with Petrarchan poetic conventions:

> In mine idolatry what showers of rain
> Mine eyes did waste! what griefs my heart did rent!
> That sufferance was my sin, now I repent;
> Because I did suffer, I must suffer pain. [2]

The exaggerated signs of misery are typical of Petrarchan poetic self-representation and, indeed, typical of Donne himself when he cries Petrarchan tears in the *Songs and Sonets*.[3] In the sonnet, Donne wishes to re-direct his suffering devotion from his mistresses to God so that he may "Mourn with some fruit, as I have mourned in vain" (4). Donne's implicit criticism of Petrarchan suffering in these lines is exactly accurate. In the *Rime Sparse*, the Petrarchan poet neither seduces Laura nor changes the object of his devotion from Laura to God and so Petrarch suffers from his unrequited desire "in vain," in the double sense of being hopelessly ineffectual and self-involved. The "fruit" of Petrarch's frustrated desire is an unrelieved narcissism, a continuous representation of the poet's suffering. Donne's repentance, however, in spite of his critical analysis of Petrarchan idolatry, results in a conversion no more appreciable than what occurs—or doesn't—in the unhappy status of the Petrarchan poet. Although Donne claims to have changed the object of his mournful devotion, the nature of his subjective state hasn't changed at all. "Because I did suffer, I must suffer pain." There is no way to differentiate between the suffering in the past tense and the suffering in the present; syntactically, both verbs even have the same grammatical object. The pun on "sufferance" (meaning "indulgence" but sounding as if it is the nominative form of "suffer") further connects the sinful self-indulgence of the poet's idolatrous past with the "vehement grief" of the now reformed poet. In a theological context, the difference between "holy discontent"

and Petrarchan grief literally makes all the difference in the world to the sinner, and one might expect, when the poetic speaker claims to have embraced that difference ("now I repent"), to see evidence of that change. Instead, the speaker complains, with ironic self-pity, that he cannot distinguish between his old role as a Petrarchan lover and his new role as a penitent Christian: "long, yet vehement grief hath been/the effect and cause, the punishment and sin." (12-14) Like Petrarch, Donne leaves us with a portrait of himself suffering without relief or redemption, and we must take the reality of a conversion on faith, a faith that in this sonnet is indistinguishable from idolatry.

Donne's renunciation of his role as a Petrarchan poet has led to a habitual misreading of his Divine Poems. Critics have taken Donne's rhetorical repudiation of Petrarchan idolatry at face value and, moreover, as the spiritual proof of his having undergone a complete religious conversion within the representational limits of these poems. Such assumptions have led to the generally accepted conclusion that the sonnet series "La Corona," the Holy Sonnets, and the other devotional works are unencumbered by Petrarchanism.[4] Even when discussing the highly "traditional" nature of Donne's Holy Sonnets, for instance, Helen Gardner insists that Donne's devotional work, like the man himself, has been "converted" from its conventional Petrarchan and Christian models:

> Donne possibly chose the sonnet form as appropriate for a set of formal meditations, but both in meditation and in the writing of his sonnets he converts traditional material to his own use. He was not, I believe, aiming at originality, and therefore the originality of the "Holy Sonnets" is the more profound. [5]

In the early seventeenth century, sonnets are an old-fashioned form for English poets, especially for one as sophisticated as the author of the *Songs and Sonets.* Gardner is glossing over the choice of a form that shouts its participation in secular and religious traditions that owe much to Petrarch.[6] I cannot help reading some anxiety in Gardner's celebration of Donne's "profound" originality: she

wishes to place him beyond the Petrarchan and Christian conventions identified by the old-fashioned sonnet form and routine meditative images. These are shallow traditions, she implies, to which a reader of less appreciation for the genius of Donne's devotional imagination may inadvertently confine the Holy Sonnets. In the context of a set of poems that Gardner herself prominently helped to date as belonging to the period leading up to Donne's ordination, the term "conversion" anticipates a profound change in Donne's life by identifying a profound change in his poetry. In Gardner's analysis, as is typical of Donne's readers, Donne the poet and Donne's poetic forms are simultaneously converted from traditional to original material, from secular conventions tainted with sensual Petrarchanism to divine purposes no longer bound to courtly manners and ambitions. In fact, as in Holy Sonnet 3, Donne conforms to conventional Petrarchan martyrdom in his devotional poetry even while he claims to disown it. The reports of his conversion from Petrarchanism, at least in reference to his devotional poetry, are greatly exaggerated.[7]

Holy Sonnet 13, "What if this present were the world's last night?," is a difficult sonnet for critics to resolve as a Christian meditation, because it is overtly Petrarchan; as such it will serve as an example of how Donne uses Petrarchan rhetoric to pray for and simultaneously prevent, or at least defer indefinitely, his commitment to a loving relationship to God. In Holy Sonnet 13, the Petrarchan qualities of Donne's divine poetry —a resistance to conversion—tend to be misread by critics anxious to find a conversionary moment, a fundamental change in the poet's relationship to God, at the heart of Donne's Divine Poetry.

> What if this present were the world's last night?
> Mark in my heart, O soul, where thou dost dwell,
> The picture of Christ crucified, and tell
> Whether that countenance can thee affright,
> Tears in his eyes quench the amazing light,
> Blood fills his frowns, which from his pierced head fell,
> And can that tongue adjudge thee unto hell,

> Which prayed forgiveness for his foes' fierce spite?
> No, no; but as in my idolatry
> I said to all my profane mistresses,
> Beauty, of pity, foulness only is
> A sign of rigour: so I say to thee,
> To wicked spirits are horrid shapes assigned,
> This beauteous form assures a piteous mind.

In the octave, Donne conflates the typically Petrarchan contemplation of the picture of the beloved in the poet's heart with a meditation on the Passion of Christ. Despite the initial invocation of Judgment Day, the resulting image of Christ neither forgives nor judges the poet. The image of Christ is difficult to interpret or, rather, to judge, because it is suspended between appearing dreadful and angry or pitiful and loving. Blood from Christ's pierced head "fills" the "frowns" on his forehead. The action is not finished, and the "frowns" are not entirely obliterated by the signs of Christ's sacrificial nature. The image with its present tense, active verbs remains in motion, changing even as the poet regards it. Donne's horrifying image of Christ crucified does not easily lend itself to the interpretation that Christ is shedding/has shed his blood for the poet-meditator, a connection typically made in Passion meditations. The fluctuating image and the questioning syntax of the sentences means that the poet quite literally cannot "tell"—he cannot or will not determine and cannot or will not say—whether Christ's countenance frightens him or comforts him. The octave poses two questions to which the poet's "No, no" is not a response, but an effective interruption.

Because he does not resolve the crucial ambivalence at the center of the meditation, the poet once again finds himself mourning in vain, a state that confounds critics who highly value resolution and conversion as dynamics of both poetry and Christianity. The poem's refusal to hand down a judgment leads at least two critics to attempt to issue their own judgment. Louis Martz underestimates the violent and grotesque aspects of the octave by optimistically reading the image as being balanced equally between its "awful" and

"loving" aspects. Martz then reads the sestet as providing an intellectual resolution that retrospectively emphasizes the loving aspects of the image of Christ crucified: "The meditative mind of the speaker then boldly finds the answer to his soul's problem, by adapting one of the themes of his 'idolatry': as he once said to 'all my profane mistresses', now he tells his soul, 'This beauteous forme assures a piteous mind'."[8] Martz believes that the conversion of the poet's "idolatry" to a traditional religious meditation retrospectively transforms Christ's blood-filled frowns into a "refuge" from the scourge they seem to be to minds less "bold" and "meditative" than Donne's. In fact, the bold and meditative mind at work here is Martz's and what foregrounds the loving-kindness of Christ in this poem is really Martz's faith that Ignatian Christian meditation can resolve the sonnet's ambiguity.

An inability to convert Petrarchan idolatry, similar to what occurs in Holy Sonnet 3, also occurs in Holy Sonnet 13. By alluding to his "idolatry" in Holy Sonnet 13, Donne makes obvious the connection between his Christian meditation on the passion of Christ and the Petrarchan convention of contemplating the beautiful image of the beloved in the poet's heart. In meditating on Christ's passion, the devotee comes to an understanding of his sins and of God's forgiveness. In Petrarchan mediation, the poet uses the image to intensify his unrequited love: the woman herself is moved neither to pity nor forgiveness while the poet becomes more deeply committed to his love and more deeply miserable. The formal turn in line 9, when the poet abruptly recalls his previous essays in Petrarchan seduction, moves the sonnet from a meditation on the proper object of a Christian's devotion to a recollection of improper objects of devotion. The sestet relies on an analogy with the repudiated form of Petrarchan rhetoric to achieve the poem's closure. In the context of Petrarchan idolatry, unlike Christian meditation, contemplation of the beloved's image cannot assure the poet of his beloved's pity, in fact, quite the contrary. The poet's Christian hopefulness is undermined in the end by his reliance, no matter how ironic, on idolatrous rhetoric to provide himself with an orthodox reassurance.

According to Richard Strier, Donne's use of Petrarchan rhetoric might possibly have worked as a successful Christian resolution of the sonnet, but the rhetorical structure is insufficiently conventional. Donne's argument is persuasive, according to Strier, only as long as the mistress/Christ figure is predominately beautiful: "The force of the argument, taken as serious in the religious context, relies on the crucified Christ being immediately recognized as a 'beauteous forme'."[9] As Strier reads the octave—in an interpretation that seems to me inescapably obvious to a reader not intent on finding signs of the poet's acceptance of God's love—the image of Christ crucified is not a "beauteous" one. Because the image of the beloved is not beautiful, according to Strier, the sonnet is therefore not Petrarchan enough to function as a religious translation of secular devotion. It is specifically as *Petrarchan* devotional poetry, however, that the sonnet achieves Donne's poetic and spiritual purposes. The argument in Holy Sonnet 13 is indeed unpersuasive, because Donne's devotional rhetoric as represented in the Holy Sonnets, like Petrarch's in the *Rime Sparse*, shows no capacity to persuade the poet of the reciprocity of God's love for him. Donne's rhetoric in the sestet has exactly the same static effect as the epideictic rhetoric of the *Rime Sparse*: it is a perfect example of Petrarchan rhetoric that inherently cannot offer assurance of the beloved's "piteous mind." This sonnet, with in its inelegant logic and incongruous idolatry, leaves us in a typically Petrarchan rhetorical stasis, wholly within the limits of self-consciously poetic language. Anne Ferry comments, "This shocking inclusion of a poem of persuasion in a sonnet beginning as a meditation on Christ must be intended to raise questions about the nature of what is in the speaker's heart, and its relation to his language" (214). The sonnet ends with the readers questioning the poet questioning himself and his language, a conventionally poetic narcissism that keeps Donne from having to confront the larger spiritual universe which he inhabits.

Strier, almost uniquely among readers of Donne's devotional poetry, acknowledges the existence of lapses of theological and poetic coherence in the Holy Sonnets, but he does so in order to fault

them as signs of Donne's inadequate faith. Strier's compelling insight that divine love is absent in the Holy Sonnets seems to have emerged from an implicit comparison of Donne with George Herbert and leads the critic to blame Donne for falling short of the Anglican saint's more restful achievements. Donne the Christian is charged with incomplete acceptance of Protestant doctrine and Donne the poet is charged with inadequate use of Petrarchan conventions. Strier is right about the Protestantism in the Holy Sonnets, but, as we've seen, Donne uses Petrarchan rhetoric in an utterly conventional and successful way. Let us grant Donne a purpose at least partially served by his recourse to this idolatrous rhetoric in the context of religious devotion.

Strier and Martz, although they come to such disparate conclusions about this poem, do so because they share the same belief about how devotional poetry ought to work. Both critics share the fundamental expectation that Renaissance devotional poetry express an animating faith that overcomes the contradictions of doubt and sin. Strier assumes, just as Martz assumes, that the poet desires to be comforted, to be persuaded by his own rhetoric and to find a compelling basis for hopefully anticipating Christ's judgment. Why, then, would Donne choose poetic discourse that conventionally undoes the ability of rhetoric to persuade and seduce, that offers cold comfort for one looking for the consummation of a loving relationship? In order, it seems, to resist representing himself as having undergone a religious conversion. Donne uses Petrarchan poetics in this sonnet to shelter himself from the force of God's love.

In his devotional poetry Donne understands very clearly that accepting God's transformative love would mean a radical change in his speaking subject, and he appears to be afraid or unable to imagine the consequences of such a conversion in the highly vulnerable, subjective space of a lyric addressed to God. He chooses Petrarchan rhetoric because it allows him to assume an attitude of devotion, to ask for God's judgment, to offer praise and prayer in fear and trembling, but never bring himself over the threshold of change. Donne's critics, with the exception of Strier,

see Donne's reluctance not as the final reality of these poems, but as the instrumental means of his conversion, the proof that a change occurs within the first person subject of the lyric. The renunciation of Donne's role as a Petrarchan poet and the concomitant existence of a radical discontinuity in his life suits our understanding of devotional poetry and religious biography, an inclination that Donne takes advantage of in his self-representations. Our willingness to see Donne over a threshold that he employs every convolution of his wit to keep from crossing does not ultimately stand up to the complexities and miseries of Donne's own representations of conversion.

The *locus classicus* of the biographical split between the old Donne and the new is the 1619 letter (to Sir Robert Ker) in which he represents his younger self as "Jack Donne" and his older as "Dr. Donne":

> It [*Biathanatos*] was written by me many years since; and because it is upon a misinterpretable subject, I have always gone so near to suppressing it, as that it is onely not burnt: no hand hath passed upon it to copy it, nor many eyes to read it . . . Keep it, I pray, with the same jealousie; let any that your discretion admits to the sight of it, know the date of it; and that it is a Book written by Jack Donne, and not by Dr. Donne: Reserve it for me, if I live, and if I die, I only forbid it the Presse, and the Fire: publish it not, but yet burn it not; between those, do what you will with it.[10]

The split between his younger and older self allows Donne, in the discourse of late twentieth-century American politics, "deniability": not that he did not know it was being written, but that it was not written by the man he is today. "It is a Book written by Jack Donne, and not by Dr. Donne." One would presume, on the basis of the separation of Dr. Donne from Jack Donne, that the "I" in the letter stands with Dr. Donne, the dignified self who occupies the same temporal moment as the writer. Instead, the Donne who creates the gap between his two selves seems to be occupying the indeterminate

space between them. Donne speaks in this passage as if he has passed over a bridge and then burned it behind him; simultaneously, his rhetoric stations him on the bridge that he denies exists, swaying in the space "between" his two selves.

In a letter written to Sir Henry Goodyer in 1614, the year before his ordination, Donne attempts to reconcile the apparent contradiction between the projected publication of his secular lyrics with his renunciation of that poetry:

> One thing more I must tell you; but so softly, that I am loath to hear my self: and so softly, that if that good Lady is in the room, with you and this Letter, she might not hear. It is, that I am brought to the necessity of printing my Poems, and addressing them to my L. Chamberlin . . . in this particular, I am under an unescapable necessity, as I shall let you perceive, when I see you next. . . for I must do this, as a valediction to the world, before I take Orders. (*Selected Prose*, 144-45)

Donne's longtime patron, Lady Bedford, is the "good Lady" in question here. Donne would like to interpret the publication of his secular poems as a gesture that signifies and reinforces—rather than undermines—his commitment to a way of life of which Lady Bedford certainly approves.[11] In this context, the word "valediction" cannot fail to evoke his four "valediction" lyrics , one or more of which would likely to be included in the forthcoming publication.[12] "Valediction" for Donne in these lyrics, however, is the paradoxical means for the departing lover to deny or defer his absence. In Donne's lyrics, the poet takes his farewell as an occasion to meditate on the persistence of his love in spite of his absence (figured as death) and to remain present at the threshold of his leaving. The poet engraves his name on the window and insists "Here you see me."[13] The crucial citation of "valediction" from Donne's poetic lexicon in a letter renouncing poetry suggests that the Donne writing this letter, whether the old or new man, may be reluctant—and conscious of the reluctance—to absent himself from the world he loves.

When Donne makes claims about the discontinuity between himself as a priest and himself as a courtier-poet, those claims seem inherently unstable, an instability Donne seems conscious of and anxious about. From Walton forward, however, readers of Donne's works have been much more sanguine about Donne's divided self-representation than he. Critics have rather cheerfully taken their cue from the Jack Donne/Dr. Donne separation that he created, for much the same reasons as he created the separation: to deny the significance of one body of work. "For whatever their motives (polishing or darkening the image)," Annabel Patterson notes, "critics and scholars have tended to count on the divide between Jack and the Doctor, in order to save the Donne they prefer from his other self."[14] Critics and scholars adopt Donne's division of himself, in order to make one set of his works and one part of his life marginal or unavailable to critical scrutiny.

The earliest critic to make use of the "divide between Jack and the Doctor" was Izaak Walton, who figures the change in career quite literally as an Augustinian conversion. At a climactic moment in Donne's biography, when the poet finally chooses to accept King James' ecclesiastical preferment, Walton avails himself of the exemplar of Saint Augustine:

> *Now* the English Church had gained a second St. Austine; for I think none was so like him before his conversion, none so like St. Ambrose after it: and if his youth had the infirmities of the one, his age had the excellence of the other; the learning and the holiness of both. And *now* all of his studies which had been occasionally diffused, were all concentrated in divinity. *Now* he had a new calling, new thoughts, and a new employment for his wit and eloquence. *Now*, all his earthly affections were changed into divine love; and all the faculties of his own soul were engaged in the conversion of others; in preaching the glad tidings of remission to repenting sinners, and peace to each troubled soul (pp. 47-48, emphasis mine).

I cite this passage at length to show how compulsively Walton points to the discontinuity between the old Donne and the "new." The word "now," repeated four times in this passage, signals the distance between the man "before his conversion" and "after." Walton so insists on this distinction that in the same sentence he invokes Augustine for the model of Donne before and Ambrose—not the perfectly appropriate Bishop of Hippo—for the model of Donne after. England's "second St. Austine" goes the original one better in the representation of his biographer: Donne's life, even as it imitates the moment of Augustine's conversion, finds its most perfect exemplar in Ambrose, one who never required such radical change.[15]

The Augustinian model persists well after the seventeenth century and Walton's essentially hagiographic work. R.C. Bald, the scrupulous modern successor to Izaak Walton's pious nostalgia, has little interest in making Donne's life an exemplary text. Yet even Bald explains this period in Donne's life with a telling recourse to hagiography:

> Thus the years of 1607-10 were probably the most disturbed and anxious years of his life. He passed through a spiritual crisis which was in large measure concealed from those closest to him . . .That Donne was able to diagnose his own complaint is not surprising, for he was doubtless well read in the literature of penitence and conversion from the *Confessions* of St. Augustine down to his own time.[16]

Bald wishes to use the analytical terms of Donne's own moment in history, by describing his "melancholy" as a "spiritual crisis," and by demonstrating its conformity to a long tradition of "penitence and conversion." He hypothesizes a similarity between Donne's behavior and those of quite exemplary men, preeminently St. Augustine; these are men about whose spiritual crises there is a sympathetic consensus. Bald argues, without much documentary evidence from Donne (the crisis "was in large measure concealed from those closest to him"), that Donne's anxiety at this time is spiritual. Bald interpolates Donne's "spiritual crisis" into a progression of "peni-

tential and conversion" texts as a kind of vestigial reflex. In this section of the biography, Bald even reaches, under cover of a footnote, for "some remarkable parallels" he perceives between the Holy Sonnets and "Bunyan's narrative of his conversion in Grace Abounding" (234n). The biographer, like his subject, is clearly well-read in conversion literature.

In Donne's autobiographical representations, he relies on the renunciation of his role as a writer of love poetry and adopts the rhetoric of conversion to defend himself from moral judgment. His biographers and critics in turn have adopted his rhetorical strategy, even to assigning him a great Christian exemplar, Saint Augustine. In his divine poetry, however, Donne creates a lyric self-representation that strenuously resists Augustinian conversion. He adopts Petrarch's strategies from the *Rime Sparse* for imitating and resisting Augustine's self-representation from the *Confessions*. *Rime* 360 presents a structure which is typical of the way Petrarch responds to the Augustinian model of self-representation, particularly in the way that the poet remains immobile in the face of imminent change and the way the poem simultaneously anticipates and defers closure. The poem is a kind of courtroom drama, in which the allegorical figure of Truth presides over the trial of Petrarch's lifelong devotion to Laura. The Petrarchan speaker laments,

> ch, vo cangiando 'l pelo,
> n, cangiar posso l'ostinato voglia.
> (For my hair is turning, but I cannot turn my obstinate will.
> 360: 41-2)[17]

Petrarch finds himself in the exact psychological situation in which Augustine finds himself just prior to his conversion in Book VIII of the *Confessions*: trapped by habit, he cannot will a "turn" or change in his life. This liminal state, marked by an ironic self-consciousness and paralysis in the face of imminent change, is the definitive state of mind and soul which Petrarch recreates in the *Rime Sparse*.

The closure of the narrative of *Rime* 360 is invoked in the very first moments of the poem, is anticipated throughout the lengthy poem, but never occurs. The Petrarchan speaker portrays himself "quasi uom che teme morte et ragion chiede" (like a man who fears death and begs for justice; 360:8). Death and judgment, figures for irrevocable finality, are imminent but in spite of the repetitious, almost ritualistic invocation of a final conclusion, closure is ultimately deferred. The poem, in the person of Truth, refuses to issue the fearfully awaited "sentenzia." Instead, she responds "sorridendo"(smiling):

> Piacemi aver vostre questione udite,
> ma pi— tempo bisogna a tanta lite.
> (It pleases me to have heard your pleas, but more time is needed for so great a lawsuit; 360:156-57)

In an abrupt, even comic, anticlimax, Truth suspends her judgment indefinitely. Truth, a smiling, appreciative audience for Petrarch's conflicted self-portraits, appears to take pleasure in the consideration of the versions of the poet's life without necessarily coming to a conclusion; the pleasure is in the pure anticipation, without end, of the sentence which ultimately and inevitably arrives in the Augustinian narrative.

In Donne's devotional sonnets, he displays the same contradictory desire and reluctance to come to closure as Petrarch does in the *Rime Sparse.* The indeterminate role of Christ as Judge in Holy Sonnet 13, for instance, transforms the comic suspension of judgment in *Rime* 360 into a more serious incapacity on the part of the poet to submit to judgment. In the first sonnet of the La Corona sonnet cycle, written somewhere between 1607 and 1609, Donne's poetic speaker, like the Petrarchan poet in *Rime* 360, appeals to a divine judge for a definitive response to his poetry and his life and waits endlessly for the answer. Whereas the Petrarchan poet does not attempt to deny the idolatrous nature of his devotion, Donne's poetic speaker repudiates his secular ambitions by strenuously

rejecting the crown of laurels famously associated with Petrarch's poetic achievement. In a rhetorical move, however, that we have come to recognize as a signature gesture in his devotional poetry, even as Donne pushes away the "vile crown of frail bays," his prayer for a spiritual "crown of glory" enacts an utterly Petrarchan imagination of desire.

> *Deign at my hands this crown of prayer and praise,*
> Weaved in my low devout melancholy,
> Thou which of good, hast, yea art treasury,
> All changing unchanged Ancient of days,
> But do not, with a vile crown of frail bays,
> Reward my muse's white sincerity,
> But what thy thorny crown gained, that give me,
> A crown of glory, which doth flower always;
> The ends crown our works, but thou crown'st our ends,
> For, at our end begins our endless rest,
> This first last end, now zealously possessed,
> With a strong sober thirst, my soul attends.
> 'Tis time that heart and voice be lifted high,
> *Salvation to all that will is nigh.*

The possibility that God might misread the poet's praise drives the dynamic of the sonnet, and sets up an opposition between two metaphorical crowns, one representing worldly fame associated with secular poetic achievement and the other Christian immortality. The "vile crown of frail bays" alludes to Petrarchan poetics, a circular metaphysics that opposes a linear historical sense with a cycle of ambition and reward, of desire and glory. The speaker here explicitly rejects the conventional literary reward for writing poetry of praise and prayer. Donne even sidesteps the word "laurel" in his description by using the synonym "bays," thus avoiding the nearly inevitable pun on Laura and laurel central to Petrarch's poetics. By shunning the word "laurel," Donne appears to be repudiating, even at the level of his diction, the defining metaphor of Petrarchan poetics: Laura and the poet laureate reflect each other in a perfectly

self-sustaining cycle of metaphorical identity, the poetic creator crowning himself with the leaves of his own praise. In lines 7-8, on the other hand, the glorious crowns associated with Christ's passion and our redemption, stand for the end of a linear, teleological process which leads to a "crowning moment." This kind of crown stands for the end of a mortal life and the Christian hope for immortality. In contrast, the crown of laurels represents a sustained and self-referential mortal ambition, an ambition that threatens to displace the Christian anticipation of the final, eschatological transformation of prayer and praise.

The poet demonstrates his ambivalence towards the kind of closure represented by the end of time by deferring the poem's formal closure and by displaying a corresponding aversion to endings on a thematic level. The teleological orientation of salvation history mirrors the conventional dynamic of an individual sonnet, one that achieves closure in 14 lines. This sense of formal closure in a single sonnet is opposed to the repeating verse form of the sonnet series to which "La Corona" as a whole conforms. The form of the series repeats the final verse of one sonnet as the initial verse of the next sonnet; the form links each successive sonnet and closes the series with the same verse with which it began: "Deign at my hands this crown of prayer and praise" (LC I:1). Formally, the series takes up each fourteenth line and makes it function successively as an ending and a beginning.

Margaret Maurer, in a reading of the entire series and the form of its "circular argument," notes that "'La Corona' is a circle: though it speaks of 'ends', it has none."[18] The first sonnet in the series epitomizes that effect by producing a number of false endings. In line 9, the poem wittily sums up the two opposing strivings of ambition and desire and their respective crowns: "The ends crown our works, but thou crown'st our ends." This line, with its epigrammatic symmetry, appears to be reaching for closure of the sonnet three lines early. The line would work very well as the witty final line of the sonnet, closing on an allusion to our ultimate end as Christians and with the actual word "ends." It doesn't, however,

close the sonnet. It forms part of a sentence which continues for the next three lines and whose syntax is remarkable for its convolution.

> The *ends* crown our works, but thou crown'st our *ends*;
> For, at our *end* begins our *end*less rest,
> This first last *end*, now zealously possessed,
> With a strong sober thirst, my soul att*ends*.
> (9-12, emphasis mine)

In spite of being punctuated with versions of the word "end," the syntax of the sentence resists completing its thought.

Donne's poetry can be dense, but usually that difficulty is a function of specialized diction or extended metaphors; in these four lines, Donne, celebrated by Helen Gardner for his ability to produce the poetic "effect of completely natural speech,"[19] has so inverted the syntax of the sentence that no one would utter it aloud with the expectation of making himself understood. A.J. Smith sensibly glosses the lines as: "his soul, zealously possessed with strong, sober thirst, awaits the 'first, last end'" (620). The syntax, however, places "possessed" and "attends" in different lines from their respective grammatical objects. It therefore sounds as if "this first last end" is that which is "zealously possessed" by means, somehow, of "a strong sober thirst" and it sounds as if "attends" stands alone as an intransitive verb. The poet has arranged the clauses to prevent the rhetorical period from coinciding with the punctuated full stop. These four lines proliferate endings, each a will-o-the-wisp: in line 10, "our end" becomes "endless"; the "last end" is actually the "first" of its kind, suggesting an oxymoronic series of final endings. Line 11 announces a false apocalypse with the incongruous "now": "this first last end, now zealously possessed." When we complete the reading of the next line, we realize the speaker does not yet possess the object of his zealous longing; instead, he is possessed by a "thirst," another metaphor for the longing itself. The last word of the sentence in line 12, "attends," presents the sonnet's sixth and final iteration of the letters which

spell "end," but the word as a whole, of course, signifies "waiting" and thus, with its open-endedness, contradicts the internal pun. Once again, Donne insists on the imagination of the human condition as lacking a real end, as end-less.

The speaker, then, is possessed by an unrealized desire for the end of his mortal condition; he waits for the end of a time during which he does, as a law of nature, feel thirst and desire. He thirsts for an end to his "strong and sober thirst":

> Whosoever drinketh of this water shall thirst again: But whosoever drinketh of the water that I shall give him shall never thirst; but the water that I shall give him shall be in him a well of water springing up into everlasting life (Jn 4:13-14).

Donne's speaker thirsts for the effects of the everlasting spring promised the Samaritan woman, but remains limited to poetic tricks, linguistic mirages, which mock—reproduce—his thirst. As in Holy Sonnet 13, the poem ends with an incorrigible narcissism above which the poet cannot lift his "heart and voice." The effect is exactly that for which Petrarch won his crown of laurels: a poetic celebration of the imagination of impossible desire. The poem, then, fails as eschatology, and fails as anti-Petrarchanism; it enacts the central Petrarchan poetic achievement, a repetitive representation of its own endless desire.

Many of Donne's Holy Sonnets adopt Petrarch's agonized immobility in the face of death and judgment ("quasi uom che teme morte et ragion chiede," like a man who fears death and begs for justice; 360:8) that remain imminent, never quite arriving within the bounds of the lyric. The *Rime Sparse* suspends the Augustinian conversion narrative, creating a lyrical space in which the poet can remain—however miserably—contemplating the frustration of his desire. Holy Sonnet 7, "At the round earth's corners, blow," creates a now familiar space in which the poet can mourn in vain. In the opening two quatrains of Holy Sonnet 7, the poet summons the "numberless infinities of souls" to return to their bodies in prepara-

tion for the Last Judgment in a splendidly breathless sentence that runs for eight lines. The imperative voice of the poet ("blow/Your trumpets, angels, and arise, arise") evokes an immediate sense of action. Line 9, however, retracts the trumpet blasts, and calls an abrupt halt to his imagination of the Last Judgment: "But let them sleep, Lord, and me mourn a space." The poet interrupts the headlong movement toward the end of time with a full stop for him to be given, he implies, enough time to learn how to repent. By ending the poem with the request "Teach me how to repent," however, instead of, for instance, an announcement of contrition in the present, the act of repentance itself is deferred. The coy request combined with the evasively conditional clause of "that's as good/ as if thou hadst sealed my pardon," makes it clear that the poet's plea is actually for more time to continue to behave like himself and to put off, to some indeterminate, hypothetical time in the future, the moment at which he actually learns his lesson. Imagining himself on the threshold of an ending, a judgment, or a fundamental change, but deferring actual closure is utterly typical of the Holy Sonnets. That "space" just before death and eternal life in which the poet "mourns" and "shakes with fear" defines the poetic achievement of much of Donne's devotional poetry and his greatest debt to Petrarch.

The speaker in Holy Sonnet 14, "Batter my heart, three-personed God," assumes the fearful position in which Augustine's soul waits in "mute trembling" for his conversion and in which Petrarch's speaker waits "con tremanti" (*Rime* 360). The key to Holy Sonnet 14 is another significant characteristic of Petrarchan rhetoric: the deliberate failure of Petrarch's praise to seduce the object of his devotion. In Holy Sonnet 13, Donne alludes to seductive rhetoric which seems unusually unpersuasive. Petrarchan rhetoric, however, does not conventionally aim for a successful seduction; instead, it enacts the frustration of a seduction that never even gets off the ground, and represents the intensity of the poet's desire for someone he cannot hope to possess.[20] In the Petrarchan context, rhetoric functions as a means of display, rather than persuasion. The Petrarchan poet speaks in order to represent a continuous vision of

himself and his beloved, each remaining unchanged in their respective positions of suffering and disdain.

The speaker of Holy Sonnet 14 desperately pleads with God to possess the poet's soul. But the sonnet only imagines the pleading without imagining that the poet's rhetoric has any effect. God occupies the remote position of the poet's beloved; Donne does not attribute to God the beloved's usual cold disdain, but He remains at an unbridgeable distance, never perceptibly returning the poet's love. Donne skates between accusing God of a kind of frigidity on the one hand or insufficiency on the other; he keeps from such blasphemies by placing the poem in the moments before God might take action and by assuming, to an extreme degree, the Petrarchan poet's tortured passivity. Donne's sonnet portrays a moment which comes as close to the actual conversion, the suddenly completed possession by God, as it can be without imagining that it has happened. Like Holy Sonnet 7, this sonnet leaves the speaker at a temporal threshold; although he has invited God to enslave him, capture him, invade him, and rape him, he remains, within the space and time represented by the sonnet, intact and bound in his current condition.

The chaste rape never occurs within the "space" of this sonnet because Donne cannot imagine himself except as he has always been. Donne cannot figure God's saving grace as anything but submission to tremendous force. The force required to overthrow and invade that undeserving and weak interior implies that there remains an intractable sense of self huddled behind the to-be-battered walls. As Donald Friedman points out, "This is the Donne . . . who can never assume the pose of penitence without reminding God that he is, after all, the very worst of sinners."[21] This heroic contradiction between what Donne says he wants and his representation of a veritable fortress of the self results in a paradoxical immobility at the threshold of conversion. The paradox of fear and hope, so much like Augustine's agony under the fig tree in its paralysis at the threshold of change, creates a Petrarchan subjectivity which remains fundamentally unchanged. Donne's impassioned

rhetoric succeeds only in displaying himself as he has always been: "n, cangiar posso l'ostinato voglia" ("but I cannot change my obstinate will," 360:42).

Donne's repeated renunciations of his role as a Petrarchan poet have been understood as evidence that his life exemplifies an Augustinian conversion, but the evidence of the Holy Sonnets suggests rather the saint's embattled inertia before he enters the garden in Milan, the deferral contained in his famous, heartfelt prayer: "Grant me chastity and continence, but not yet."[22] Donne understands very specifically what accepting the love of God means to his poetic self: it means a "valediction to the world," a replacement of the old man with the new man. Donne cannot imagine a speaking subject withstanding the force of that change and continuing to speak in his own voice. Instead, he chooses to represent himself in Petrarchan lyrics so that he might protect his poetic subject from the force of a divine love that would remake — and possibly remove—him. In the tradition of the *Rime Sparse*, praise functions as a means of persuading one who is by nature absolutely impervious to praise; it fails as a means of seduction and succeeds as a representation of unrequited and unremitting desire. The lyrics of the *Rime Sparse* create a poetic subject who remains agonized and immobile, at the threshold of changing the object of his devotion, but who never, in the space of the lyric, undergoes that conversion. This rhetorical situation defines the stance which Donne adopts when he writes poetry of "prayer and praise" and offers it to God.

The absence of divine love in Donne's Holy Sonnets signifies an achievement, not a defect; it marks the continuing presence, against all theologically correct principles, of his poetic subject represented according to Petrarchan conventions. Ironically, then, when Donne most strenuously turns away from conventional Petrarchan objects of praise in order to adore God, he employs quintessentially Petrarchan rhetoric. A Petrarchan devotional stance, whether the speaker assumes it at the feet of a woman or in the face of God, makes the kind of conversion that is usually

claimed by and for Donne impossible for the first person subject of his devotional lyrics. Donne renounces his secular, generic Petrarchan role to signal a conversion which never occurs in his divine poems, the most truly, specifically Petrarchan works of his *oeuvre*.

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Notes

1. Izaak Walton was Donne's first biographer. All references to *Life of Dr. John Donne, Late Dean of St. Paul's Church, London*, will be to George Saintsbury's edition of all four of Walton's biographies. (London, 1927). "Austine" is a contraction for Augustine. The second phrase is from Sidney's *Astrophel and Stella* 15.

2. Holy Sonnet 3, 5-8. All references to Donne's poetry are from *John Donne: The Complete English Poems*, ed. A.J. Smith (London: Penguin Books, 1971, 1987). For the devotional poetry, I also make extensive use—as does Smith—of Helen Gardner's *John Donne: The Divine Poems* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2nd. ed. 1978).

3. For instance, in Twicknam Garden: "Blasted with sighs, and surrounded with tears/Hither I come" (1-2).

4. One notable exception to this critical consensus is Anne Ferry who convincingly reads Donne's devotional sonnets in the context of the Petrarchan sonnets of Wyatt, Sidney, and Shakespeare in *The "Inward" Language: Sonnets of Wyatt, Sidney, Shakespeare and Donne* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983).

5. Helen Gardner, "Donne's Religious Poetry," in *John Donne: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Helen Gardner (New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1962), p.132.

6. Gardner here is not interested in the way Donne's sonnets belong to any tradition of poetry, courtly or religious, in spite of there being a vigorous tradition of religious and courtly sonnets in which Donne's work, however idiosyncratically, participates. For instance, William Stull points out that: "Between 1530 and 1660 the Christian sonnet developed in England alongside and ultimately beyond its courtly counterpart." ("'Why Are Not Sonnets Made of Thee?' A New Context for the 'Holy Sonnets' of Donne, Herbert and Milton," *Modern Philology*, November, 1982, 129.) Stull's scholarship is helpful in understanding these religious works, specifically sonnets, in their own tradition, but I would emphasize the continuities between the *Rime Sparse* and the religious poetry, rather than their distinctness, as he does. In fact, I use the term "devotional" to refer to poetry in which the poet takes a devotional stance either with regard to a beloved woman or to God.

Gardner is also, I think, responding to Louis Martz's work which was contemporary to the first version of her edition of Donne's Divine Poems, and attempting to downplay Donne's use of the shape and imagery of Ignatian meditative exercises.

7. My argument about the Petrarchanism of the Divine Poetry is applicable to "La Corona," the Holy Sonnets, and "Good Friday, 1613. Riding Westward." I read "A Hymn To Christ, at the Author's last going into Germany" as a convincing renunciation of Petrarchan poetic conventions.

8. Louis Martz, *The Poetry of Meditation: A Study in English Renaissance of the Seventeenth Century* (rev. ed., New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1962), p.84.

9. Richard Strier, "John Donne Awry and Squint: The 'Holy Sonnets' 1608-10," *Modern Philology* May (1989), 364.

10. *John Donne, Selected Prose*, eds. Helen Gardner and Timothy Healy, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967), p.152.

11. The offense he is contemplating is twofold: appearing in print as the author of these secular poems and dedicating them to other patrons. As Bald explains, Donne "proposed not merely to print a collection of his poems, but also to dedicate the volume to Somerset, and to include a selection of verses addressed to other patrons and patronesses as well as to Lady Bedford herself" (296). Donne negotiates the thin ice of his relationship to Lady Bedford with some difficulty: he cannot hope to keep the publication (no matter how limited, as he assures Goodyer) with its multiple patrons secret, and his insistence on the "necessity" which he feels is for Goodyer's benefit, as the confidential "I shall let you perceive, when I see you next" suggests. Ultimately, the "necessity" connected with the Lord Chamberlain, Somerset, faded when Somerset fell, and the poems were not published.

12. "A Valediction: forbidding Mourning, " "A Valediction: of the Book," "A Valediction: of my Name in the Window," and "A Valediction: of Weeping"

13. "Valediction: of my Name in the Window," 12.

14. Annabel Patterson, "Quod oportet *versus* quod convenit: *John Donne, Kingsman*?" *Critical Essays on John Donne*, ed. Arthur F. Marotti, G.K. Hall & Co, New York:1994 , 146.

15. There doesn't seem to be the same turning point in Ambrose's life as there is in Augustine's. Ambrose assumed the bishopric by acclamation, while still a catechumen, which suggests an identification with Christianity from the earliest possible moment.

16. R.C. Bald, *John Donne: A Life*, (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970), p.235.

17. All of Petrarch's text has been taken from *Petrarch's Lyric Poems*. trans. and ed. Robert Durling. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1976. The English translations are Durling's, unless otherwise noted.

18. Margaret Maurer, "The Circular Argument of Donne's 'La Corona,'" *SEL* 22(1982), 52.

19. Gardner, speaking of the accomplishments of the Holy Sonnets, says: "The effect of completely natural speech is achieved by exploiting to the full the potentialities of the sonnet." "The Religious Poetry of John Donne," p.131.

20. See especially Joel Fineman's discussion of Petrarchan rhetoric in *Shakespeare's Perjur'd Eye: The Invention of Poetic Subjectivity in the Sonnets* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986).

21. Donald M. Friedman, "Memory and the Art of Salvation in Donne's Good Friday Poem," *ELR* 3 (1973):441.

22. *Confessions* VIII.vii.17.