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"since that I may know": Donne and the Biblical Basis of Sexual Knowledge

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At the close of John Donne's "Elegie: Going to Bed," the speaker implores his female interlocutor to remove her final piece of clothing in order to "dignifie" him with the "imputed grace" that he needs in order to enjoy sexual salvation.[1]

> Then since that I may know;
> As liberally, as to a Midwife shew
> Thy selfe: cast all, yea, this white lynnen hence,
> There is no penance due to innocence.
> (43–46)

I am not concerned with the semantically disturbing textual variants presented by the final line of this passage.[2] Rather, I would like to focus

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[1]Donne, "Elegie: Going to Bed," in *The Complete Poetry of John Donne*, ed. John T. Shawcross (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1967), line 42. All quotations of Donne's verse are from this edition and will be cited parenthetically by line number.

[2]In addition to Shawcross's text of "Elegie: Going to Bed," see the text of the poem in Helen Gardner, ed., *The Elegies and the Songs and Sonnets of John Donne* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965); Robin Robbins, ed., *The Poems of John Donne*, 2 vols., Longman Annotated English Poets (Harlow: Pearson, 2008); and *The Variorum Edition of the Poetry of John Donne, Volume 2, The Elegies*, ed. Gary A. Stringer et al. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000). Gardner: "Then since I may knowe, / As liberally as to a midwife showe / Thyselfe; cast all, yea this white linnen hence. / Here is no pennance, much lesse innocence." Robbins: "Then, since I may know, / As lib'rally as to a midwife show / Thyself! Cast all,

upon the phrase that all of the editions that I have consulted have more or less in common: "Then since that I may know." In order that the speaker may know *what*?, the reader must wonder, for the construction in English seems to call for a direct object. While the import of the passage is clear (the male speaker hopes to see the female interlocutor completely naked in order that he might experience the full revelation that she has to offer), the syntax hangs suspended precipitously at the end of the line with no relief forthcoming.

The phrase, I believe, may be a small but telling indicator of Donne's knowledge of, and engagement with the theological implications of, Hebrew, about which scholars have long speculated. Writing to an unidentified correspondent in July 1613, Donne reported that "I am . . . busying myself a little in the search of the Eastern tongues, where a perpetual perplexity in the words cannot choose but cast a perplexity upon the things."[3] Four hundred years later, uncertainty over exactly how much Hebrew Donne considered "a little" continues to cast a perplexity upon such "things" as Donne's *Sermons* and *Essayes in Divinity*. R. C. Bald asserted that Donne studied Hebrew with John Layfield, whom Bald identifies as "an excellent Hebraist, and . . . one of the group of divines who sat at Westminster to revise the Pentateuch for the Authorized Version."[4] Yet in G. Lloyd Jones's demonstration of "the

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yea, this white linen, hence: / There is no penance, much less innocence!" *Donne Variorum* (Stringer et al.): "Then since I may know, / As liberally as to a Midwife show / Thy selfe. Cast all, yea this whight linnen hence, / Ther is no penance, much lesse innocence." Shawcross's reading of line 46, "There is no penance due to innocence," seems intended to assure the female interlocutor that she has nothing to be ashamed of because her actions are blameless. Conversely, Gardner's "Here is no pennance, much lesse innocence" implies that the woman's past sexual experience (that is, her lack of innocence) puts her beyond the pale of repentence.

[3]Quoted in Edmund Gosse, *The Life and Letters of John Donne, Dean of St. Pauls*, 2 vols. (New York: Dodd, Mead, 1899), 2:16.

[4]Bald, *John Donne: A Life* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970), p. 281. Because of his association with Donne, Layfield's knowledge of Hebrew weighs significantly upon my argument. Layfield was a member of the First Westminster Company, which was charged with translating Genesis through Kings—that is, those portions of the Bible in which the verb *yada* is most prominently used with a sexual connotation. According to Adam Nicholson

existence of a greater number of Hebrew students in the English universities than was once supposed," Layfield does not merit mention among the numerous lecturers, schoolmasters, private tutors and advocates of Hebrew study in sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century England.[5] Indeed, Adam Nicholson, who writes appreciatively of Layfield as a scholar, explorer, and "prose writer of real distinction," concludes that Layfield was "more a Greek than a Hebrew scholar."[6] A similarly ambivalent conclusion is drawn by George R. Potter and Evelyn M. Simpson, the editors of Donne's *Sermons*: "Evidently Donne took much more interest in Hebrew studies than in Greek, and his knowledge of the language was more extensive. There is nothing surprising about this, for when he was at Oxford Hebrew had more students than Greek, and there was great enthusiasm for the Hebrew language among theologians."[7] But after noting Donne's reliance upon concordances and polyglot Bibles, Potter and Simpson cite a number of passages in which he was misled by his sources, suggesting that his knowledge of Hebrew was equivocal at best.[8]

(*God's Secretaries: The Making of the King James Bible* [New York: Harper Perennial, 2004]), Layfield reveals elsewhere by his use of English the "vital sense of narrative" that allowed him to bring "to life some of the great narratives of the Bible" (p. 103), and so may have provided the King James Bible with its pithy phrasing of *yada* as "to know." Thus, even if Layfield had not mastered Hebrew, he still may have communicated to Donne the import of the discussions of the term that were held among the members of his company, and discussed with Donne the implications of biblical Hebrew for the poet's emergent theology of human sexuality.

For a wide-ranging survey of Hebraic culture in seventeenth-century England, see Achsah Guibbory, *Christian Identity: Jews and Israel in Seventeenth-Century England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010). Guibbory is particularly strong in demonstrating the ways in which "the turn to the Hebrew Bible and to the history of ancient Israel was an effort to create a past for England, to furnish a particular national identity that had a 'sacred foundation'" (p. 23).

[5]Jones, *The Discovery of Hebrew in Tudor England: A Third Language* (Manchester, England: Manchester University Press, 1983), p. 263.

[6]Nicholson, pp. 102, 192.

[7]Potter and Simpson, eds., *The Sermons of John Donne*, 10 vols. (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1953–1962), 1:307.

[8]Potter and Simpson, 1:311–312.

Recently Chanita Goodblatt has borrowed the terminology and language of Matt Goldish in order to propose that Donne be considered "a third-order Hebraist"—that is, one "who could read some Hebrew, but who knew and used significant amounts of Jewish literature in Latin and vernacular translation."[9] Citing Donne's familiarity with a number of Jewish linguistic interpretive sources that had been absorbed by Christian thinkers, she argues persuasively that Donne most likely possessed "a basic, lexical grasp of the Hebrew language while learning the more sophisticated semantic nuances of Jewish medieval exegesis from the intermediate Christian Hebraist sources cited so abundantly throughout his sermons."[10]

I believe that the phrase "since that I may know" depends upon Donne's appreciation of the multiple meanings of the Hebrew verb *yada*—that is, most importantly, to know by seeing and to have sexual intercourse with—as when the narrator reports that "And Adam knew Eve his wife; and she conceived, and bare Cain, and said, 'I have gotten a man from the Lord'" (Genesis 4:1),[11] or when the men of Sodom demand that Lot make his angelic visitors available for their sexual use by asking, "Where are the men which came in to thee this night? Bring them out unto us, that we may know them" (Genesis 19:5).[12] To a

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[9]Goodblatt, *The Christian Hebraism of John Donne: Written with the Fingers of Man's Hand* (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 2010), p. 22.

[10]Goodblatt, p. 26.

[11]Quotations from the Bible are to the Authorized (King James) Version.

[12]In *Tanakh: A New Translation of the Holy Scripture according to the Traditional Hebrew Text* (Philadelphia, PA: Jewish Publication Society, 1985), Genesis 4:1 is glossed as "*Heb*. Yada', often in a sexual sense" (p. 7). The entry for *yada* in the *Polyglot Bible* (www.sacred-texts.com/bib/poly/h3045.htm, accessed 16 May 2011) communicates the complex meaning of the word:

> A primitive root; to *know* (properly to ascertain by *seeing*); used in a great variety of senses, figuratively, literally, euphemistically and inferentially (including *observation*, *care*, *recognition*; and causatively *instruction*, *designation*, *punishment*, etc.): - acknowledge, acquaintance (-ted with), advise, answer, appoint, assuredly, be aware, [un-]awares, can [-not], certainly, for a certainty, comprehend, consider, X could they, cunning, declare, be diligent, (can, cause to) discern, discover,

> endued with, familiar friend, famous, feel, can have, be [ig-] norant, instruct, kinsfolk, kinsman, (cause to, let, make) know, (come to give, have, take) knowledge, have [knowledge], (be, make, make to be, make self) known, + be learned, + lie by man, mark, perceive, privy to, X prognosticator, regard, have respect, skillful, shew, can (man of) skill, be sure, of a surety, teach, (can) tell, understand, have [understanding], X will be, wist, wit, wot.

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Additionally, on the relation of knowledge to human sexual intercourse, see Moshe Idel's analysis, in *Kabbalah and Eros* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2005), of how

> the nature of the sexual intercourse of male and female functions as a metaphor of the divine eros for Israel. Thus, the concrete sexual details understood in horizontal terms become a means to penetrate to an experience which may reflect a vertical relation between God and the chosen people, and to a form of emotional experience. The interpenetration of the sexual imagery and the emotional attitude, *hibbah*, are part of the vision shared by biblical and rabbinic thought, which did not sharply differentiate between the two.
>
> (p. 31)

The *Geneva Bible*'s translation of the passages from Genesis likewise renders *yada* as "know": "Afterward the man knew Heuah his wife which conceived and bare Kain, and said, I have obtained a man by the Lord" and "Who crying vnto Lot sayed to him, Where are the men, which came to thee this night: bring them out vnto vs, that we may know them" (*Geneva Bible: A Facsimile of the 1599 Edition with Undated Sternhold & Hopkins Psalms* [Ozark, MO: L. L. Brown, 1990], Genesis 4:1, 19:5).

Robbins glosses line 43 of "Going to Bed" as "Know] In the Hebrew, biblical usage 'sexually'" (1:330 n. 43), but fails to elaborate. Likewise, Clay Hunt argues, in *Donne's Poetry: Essays in Literary Analysis* (1954; repr., Hamden, CT: Archon, 1969), that Donne puns "on the sexual meaning of 'know'" (p. 27) as part of an attempt to "place the sexual act in a metaphysical context. Here Donne's mind seems suddenly to pierce through the flesh to see what this act means. . . . In these lines Donne's celebration of lust becomes literally and substantially metaphysical" (p. 30).

linguistically astute reader like Donne, the construction might denote sexual intercourse as a mode of ontology, sexual penetration being the channel by which an otherwise ineffable knowledge is transferred from the knower to the person who is eager to acquire such knowledge—like the enlightenment in Gnostic tradition that Mary Magdalene received when she spoke privately with, and was kissed by, Jesus[13]—or, in the case of Donne's elegy, when the woman who is a "mystick book" containing information that will guarantee the speaker's salvation must first "dignifie" the man with her "imputed grace" before she can drop her final piece of clothing and reveal to him the contents of that book (41–43).

But for Donne the biblical verb also hints at an intimacy between two people that surpasses rational understanding and, thus, suggests a familiarity so deep that it borders on one person's sharing or, even, subsuming his or her partner's identity. Implying that sexual intercourse is the ultimate means by which one person can fully know and be known by another, the phrase places the Bible on a par with such other influential models for human interrelationship as Aristophanes's myth in Plato's *The Symposium* of why humans can only regain their prelapsarian sense of completeness through sexual union with another person, and

[13]In the Gnostic Gospel of Mary, Andrew disputes the possibility that the Savior might possibly have spoken "with a woman without our knowledge (and) not openly." After Andrew asks incredulously "Did he prefer her to us?," Peter answers, "Surely the Savior knows her very well. That is why he loved her more than us" (*The Nag Hammadi Library in English*, 3rd, completely rev. ed., ed. James M. Robinson [New York: Harper and Row, 1988], pp. 526–527). Concerning the Gospel of Mary, Elaine Pagels observes, in *The Gnostic Gospels* (New York: Random House, 1979), that "the hint of an erotic relationship between him [the Savior] and Mary Magdalene may indicate claims to mystical communion" (pp. 22, 18). Pagels additionally notes that the "rivalry between the male disciples and Mary Magdalene" in the Gnostic Gospel of Philip is based upon Jesus's having made her both his "most intimate companion" and "the symbol of divine Wisdom" (p. 64). Pagels quotes the fragmentary Gospel of Philip: "the companion of [the Savior] is Mary Magdalene. [But Christ loved] her more than [all] the disciples and used to kiss her [often] on her [mouth]. The rest of [the disciples were offended by it . . .]. They said to him, 'Why do you love her more than all of us?'" (p. 64; compare *Nag Hammadi*, p. 148). And Pagels notes that in the Gnostic Dialogue of the Savior, Mary "spoke as a woman who knew the All" (p. 64; compare "She uttered this as a woman who had understood completely," in *Nag Hammadi*, p. 252).

Tennessee Williams's description of "broken gates between people so they can reach each other, even if it's just for one night."[14] Clearly, the biblical verb *yada* is a provocative phrase that caught Donne's attention as he struggled to identify, and sometimes to collapse, the boundaries between the sacred and the profane, and between erotic and spiritual experience.[15]

How much of this significance might Donne have hoped to appropriate for a poem like "Going to Bed"? And, more difficult to discern, how adept in Hebrew might he have expected his readers to be? We can only speculate. But recurrent use of the English verb "to know" in his poems with either a coy or an explicitly sexual association suggests the extent to which the combination of ideas in Hebrew challenged Donne's imagination, running a gamut of associations and, thus, providing him with, at the one extreme, a source of ribald play with which he could engage the members of his Inns of Court male coterie, and, at the other, with a means of framing in the Divine Poems what Michael Steig provocatively terms Donne's unconscious rape fantasy.[16]

Consider, first, Donne's most explicit use of the term. In "Elegie: On his Mistris," a male speaker, attempting to discourage his female beloved

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[14]Williams, *The Night of the Iguana*, in *Plays 1957–1980*, ed. Mel Gussow and Kenneth Holditch (New York: Library of America, 2000), p. 408.

[15]Arguing that Leone Ebreo's *Dialoghi d'amore* (1535) offered Renaissance poets an influential "refutation of dualisms and the justification of universal unity," T. Anthony Perry proposes, in *Erotic Spirituality: The Integrative Tradition from Leone Ebreo to John Donne* (University: University of Alabama Press, 1980), that rather than viewing Donne's "The Extasie" as "an indecent proposal," readers accept that the speaker's "call to return to the body is an act of integration, a binding of our opposite tendencies into a unified and living being through the subtle knot that defines our humanity" (p. 5). Although I am uncertain that Ebreo could have exerted as direct an influence on Renaissance English poets as Perry suggests, I find his notion of an "erotic spirituality" very useful when discussing writers like Donne and Herbert, and have applied his larger argument to "Elegie: Going to Bed" in two articles ("Donne's Erotic Spirituality: Ovidian Sexuality and the Language of Christian Revelation in Elegy XIX," *Ball State University Forum* 25 [1984]: 41–54, and "Moses, Dante, and the *Visio Dei* of Donne's 'Elegy 19,'" *ANQ: American Notes and Queries* n. s. 6 [1993]: 13–17).

[16]Steig, "Donne's Divine Rapist: Unconscious Fantasy in Holy Sonnet XIV," *Hartford Studies in Literature* 4 (1972): 52–58.

from accompanying him abroad disguised as his male page, spells out the danger in which she would place herself.

> Men of France . . .
> Will quickly know thee, and no lesse, alas!
> Th'indifferent Italian, as we passe
> His warme land, well content to thinke thee Page,
> Will hunt thee with such lust, and hideous rage,
> As *Lots* faire guests were vext.
>
> (33–41)

By emphasizing the pun upon "alas" (an interjection of dismay) and "a lass" (that is, a young woman), Shawcross's reading of line 37 hints at the grief that comes of sexual knowledge. As he prints the line, the French gallants—in their alacrity to call socially upon the English travelers—will discover soon enough that the speaker's male page is in reality a woman. But although none of the commentary summarized by the editors of the *Donne Variorum* identifies the biblical meaning of "to know," their representation of line 37 establishes even more clearly than Shawcross the sexual implications of the verb: Frenchmen "Will quickly know thee, and know thee"—that is, after first politely making the page's acquaintance, the French gallants will see through her disguise and force their sexual attentions upon her. While adopting the same line reading as the *Variorum*, Robbins italicizes the second "know" ("Will quickly know thee, and *know* thee"), as though to emphasize with a tonal wink and nod the difference between the first, seemingly neutral, and the second, sexually charged, meanings of the word. Yet as "quickly" as the French will seek to meet the visitor socially and, after seeing through the page's disguise, "know" her sexually, the sexually "indifferent" Italians—famous among the English for their sodomitical predilections—will from the outset actively pursue the beguiling young "man" and will not be discouraged even when they discover that "he" is in reality a she. (Think of Joe E. Brown in the fade out of Billy Wilder's *Some Like It Hot* as Jack Lemmon's Daphne pulls off "her" wig and protests to "her" ardent pursuer, "But I'm a man!" "Well, nobody's perfect," Brown's voice is heard to say off camera.[17]) The ensuing reference to how "Lots faire

[17]Wilder, dir., *Some Like It Hot* (United Artists, 1959).

guests were vext" by the men of Sodom makes explicit the biblical source of the erotic meaning of "know."

But Donne's play upon the biblically inspired meaning of "to know" is generally more subtle than the implicit sex farce that borders precipitously on tragedy in "Elegie: On his Mistris." Consider stanza 4 of Donne's "The Blossom," a poem in which the speaker, who is leaving for London, argues with his heart, which wants to remain behind with the woman with whom the speaker has most recently fallen in love.

> Well then, stay here; but know,
> When thou hast stayd and done thy most;
> A naked thinking heart, that makes no show,
> Is to a woman, but a kinde of Ghost;
> How shall shee know my heart; or having none,
> Know thee for one?
> Practise may make her know some other part,
> But take my word, shee doth not know a Heart.
> (25–32)

The verb "know" is used five times in a mere eight-lines, each use upping the poem's sexual ante. The initial use (25) is a neutral command of instruction: but you should know (that is, understand) how little use a woman has for a man's "naked thinking heart." But as repetition of the word increases in lines 29–30, a pathos momentarily enters the poem: it is useless for the heart to stay in the country after its owner has left for town because, lacking a heart herself, the speaker's mistress is unable to recognize what the speaker's heart is and, thus, is incapable of appreciating the lover's sacrifice. The sexual implications of the verb triumph in the stanza's final two lines when the speaker notes that the mistress's repeated penetration by "some other part"—that is, a male lover's phallus—leaves her incapable of being "known" or penetrated emotionally. The stanza thus betrays a conundrum similar to the one experienced by the sexually frustrated male speaker of Donne's "The Apparition" who is disappointed to understand that his mistress's *froideur* is not a manifestation of her noble-minded chastity, but an indication of her lack of sexual interest in him only among her suitors. A woman who desires to be "known" by "some other part" is not likely to be interested in her lover's heart.

Should a reader hesitate to accept the ingeniousness of Donne's verbal play in this stanza of "The Blossom," it is worth noting that the verb's biblical resonance is amplified by an earlier reference in the poem to the heart's misguided desire "to nestle . . . / In a forbidden or forbidding tree" (10–12). Donne plays elsewhere with the suggestion that eating the fruit of the biblical Tree of Knowledge provides a sexual initiation. The phallically minded speaker of "Elegie: Natures lay Ideot" reminds his interlocutor that "I planted knowledge and lifes tree in thee," thereby refining her "into a blis-full paradise" (23–25). For many seventeenth-century commentators, Adam and Eve's Fall after eating fruit from the proscribed Tree of Knowledge marked in quick succession their initial sexual experience and subsequent post-coital *tristesse* or shame: "And the eyes of them both were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together, and made themselves aprons" (Genesis 3:7).[18] The speaker of the elegy, however, chauvinistically appropriates Yahweh's power to create the cosmos by associating his phallus with the ambivalently differentiated Tree of Knowledge and Tree of Life in the Garden of Eden. He claims to have been able both to enlighten sexually and to awaken to a new life his hitherto sexually dormant or inexperienced mistress—just as, in a gender role reversal, the male speaker of Donne's "The good-morrow" is himself awakened by his experience of coitus with the unnamed female interlocutor.

"Women are like the Arts, forc'd unto none, / Open to all searchers, unpriz'd if unknowne," warns the speaker of "Elegie: Change" (5–6).

[18]In *One Flesh: Paradisal Marriage and Sexual Relations in the Age of Milton* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987), James Grantham Turner offers a magisterial summary of patristic, Reformation, and seventeenth-century English debates over the role of human sexuality in the prelapsarian world and as the cause of the Fall itself. Much of the debate concerned the implications in Genesis 1–3 of woman as either man's equal or his subordinate, and of the primary purpose of marriage as providing companionship or legitimizing lust and ensuring procreation. Although Turner does not deal directly with the concept of *yada*, he echoes it when he notes the centrality of desire in *Paradise Lost* and the ways by which Milton "endows it [desire] with a perceptive as well as an appetitive power": "The Edenic state is suffused with a Solomonic eroticism far more intense than anything Augustine conjectured, a transfigured but connatural sexuality that has the qualities of prayer and *acclivitas*, yet with no ascetic renunciation of the flesh" (p. 94).

While both Clay Hunt and John Shawcross note in passing the "pun on the meaning 'to know sexually,'"[19] the majority of Donne's commentators fail to consider the sexual implications of the couplet. For example, Robin Robbins—who provides some of the best informed glosses on Donne's poems in general—is content to follow Pierre Legouis and note only that the final phrase is "a variation on the scholastic adage, *ignoti nulla cupido*, 'For what is not known there is no desire.'"[20] Yet the couplet is part of a web of sexual suggestions that extends throughout the *Elegies* and *Songs and Sonets*, explaining, for example, the stance of quasi-devotion that the speaker of "Going to Bed" takes before the mistress who offers him a prize analogous to the wealth of the New World, who must voluntarily reveal herself to the male speaker, and knowledge of whom divides "fools" (37) and "lay-men" (39) from those who have been dignified by the woman's "imputed grace" (42).

When read in the light of this couplet, the sexual component of the search for knowledge in Donne's love lyrics becomes all the more provocative. "Let mee, and doe you, twenty [partners] know," the speaker of "The Indifferent" (15) argues with the mistress who wants to remain "true" to just one man. The speaker of "Confined Love" similarly protests the unnatural law that "One [woman] should but one man know" (6). Indeed, the verb "know" becomes so deeply colored by its association with sexual experience or physical sensation in Donne's poems that once a reader becomes aware of its significance for Donne, it is difficult to scrub his lines free of the association. "Whoever guesses, thinks, or dreames he knowes / Who is my mistris, wither by this curse," warns the speaker of "The Curse" (1–2), the enjambment at the end of the first line raising the possibility that the nosey friend who is determined to learn the identity of the speaker's mistress may actually seek to "know" her biblically. Likewise, the speaker of "The Extasie"—a poem that collapses the erotic and the spiritual so completely as to leave some readers uncomfortable concerning the nature of the speaker's intentions—distinguishes between the hypothetical witness who "knew not which soule spake" (25) and the lovers themselves who "know / Of what we are compos'd, and made" (45–46). "Know thy foes," the speaker of *Satyre III*

[19]Hunt, p. 212 n. 32, and Shawcross, p. 59 n. 6.
[20]Robbins, 1:332 n. 6.

counsels (33) in a poem that figures "true religion" in terms of possible mistresses to be courted.

Donne's use of the verb "to know" eventually runs the gamut of what love can be, for knowledge of another person can be, on the one hand, merely a matter of sexual possession, or, on the other, an apprehension of the innermost truth of one's partner, leaving the souls as naked as the lovers' bodies. "[L]et mee know" of the existence of "a woman true, and fair," the cavalier speaker of "Song: Goe, and catche a falling starre" (18–19) entreats, punning on what he would like to do to her once he has been informed of her identity, and suggesting as well what "two, or three" will have done to her before he can complete his pilgrimage in search of her. Yet, to a "naked thinking heart" sex can rarely be simply sex. The interjection of "Going to bed" with which this essay began—"Since that I may know"—is echoed by the speaker's assertion "That I may know" in "The Message" (18) and "I needs must know" in "A nocturnall upon S. Lucies day" (31), as assertions of the speaker's will. That will can be sexual, as Renaissance usage sometimes has it,[21] but the assertion in "A nocturnall" proves a particularly telling example of how ambivalent a speaker's will can be inasmuch as the death of the woman who was "all" to him has left him in an emotional darkness figured both as the loss of physical or sexual vitality, and as the loss of his only source of spiritual enlightenment or knowledge: sex and love carry far-reaching metaphysical implications. And just as the speaker of "Air and Angels" weighs the relation of men's love to women's love as a way of ascertaining the proper balance between body and spirit in love, so the oftentimes ambivalent and paradoxical use of the word "know" in such poems as "Negative love" (compare lines 6 and 9 with "If any who deciphers best, / What we know not, our selves, can know, / Let him teach once that nothing" in lines 14–16) and "Loves Exchange" ("Let me not know that others know / That she knowes my pain," 19–20) implies the relation of sexual love to a knowledge so complex that it can only be delivered through a verbal *leger de main* in which one meaning of the word morphs into another in a kind of linguistic alchemy.

Because that depth of knowledge can best be imaged as sexual penetration, ultimately for Donne sexual knowing is an experience so

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[21]Eric Partridge, *Shakespeare's Bawdy: A Literary and Psychological Essay and a Comprehensive Glossary* (1948; repr., New York: Dutton, 1960), p. 221.

intense that it blurs the line between the body of the knower and the known, and conflates the identities of the penetrator and the penetrated. If in the *Elegies* and *Songs and Sonets* the male speaker's desire is to "know" the female interlocutor, in the Divine Poems it is that he will himself be known by God. "Goodfriday, 1613. Riding Westward" concludes in a manner remarkably similar to "Going to Bed." In the course of his journey on horseback westward on "Pleasure or businesse" (7), the speaker grows to understand that on the feast of the Lord's crucifixion his attention should be directed eastward to the site where Christ suffers on the cross for the sins of humankind. Humbled by this realization, he concludes that he will keep his back turned toward his Savior in order that he might be scourged and, thus, suffer punishment for his sins.

> I turne my back to thee, but to receive
> Corrections, till thy mercies bid thee leave.
> O thinke mee worth thine anger, punish mee,
> Burne off my rusts, and my deformity,
> Restore thine Image, so much, by thy grace,
> *Thou may'st know mee*, and I'll turne my face.
> (37–42, emphasis added)

Like the speaker of "Going to Bed," the speaker of "Goodfriday" relies upon a sequence of imperatives to engage a redemptive force on his behalf.[22] And like his brother speaker, the rider of "Goodfriday" is concerned with knowing. But rather than seeking to know the woman whose dropping her final piece of clothing will dignify him with the imputed grace necessary to his sexual salvation, the speaker of "Goodfriday" seeks to be known by God—that is, to be cleansed of the distorting features of sin through divine chastisement, so that God may recognize the speaker as having been created in God's image and allow the speaker to see Him face to face as Moses was once permitted to do.

It is too easy to conclude that in turning his back in order to be "known" by God, the speaker is inviting God to sodomize him (much as some readers are rendered uncomfortable by the implications of exactly which compass leg grows erect as the male speaker returns to the female

[22]Frontain, "Donne, Spenser, and the Performative Mode of Renaissance Poetry," *Explorations in Renaissance Culture* 32.1 (2006): 76–102.

beloved in "A Valediction forbidding mourning"). Rather, as we have seen, the biblical associations of the verb "to know" carry for Donne a wealth of associations that extend from the bawdy to a profound guarantee regarding the very foundation of human existence. In his study of "how discourses of the sacred can serve to authorize the ecstatic, the excessive, and the illicit" in seventeenth-century devotional poetry, Richard Rambuss analyzes how, in a "sort of ecstatically authorized transgression," Donne uses "metaphors of illicit sex" ("rape, debauchery, sodomy") in order "to body forth divine operations that are world-altering."[23] For Donne, knowing and being known are equally aggressive actions inasmuch as Donne's speakers seek to be known by an implacably silent God in as forceful and commanding a manner as elsewhere they seek to know their invariably silent female interlocutors. To be known by God is to be loved, is to be caressed with a hand that is as severe in its rebuke as simultaneously it is able to arouse the person of faith and/or desire to ecstasy. It involves a penetration so deep that one is subsumed into the identity of the Creator/Redeemer. It goes beyond reason's ability to know or understand. Although the verb "to know" does not appear in "Holy Sonnet: Batter my heart," the speaker's agonized request is all too familiar to readers of Donne's other poems:

> Divorce mee, untie, or breake that knot againe,
> Take mee to you, imprison mee, for I
> Except you enthrall mee, never shall be free,
> Nor ever chast, except you ravish mee.
> (11–14)

The speaker of "Batter my heart" might have preceded this litany of violent actions with a simple, "Then since that you may know."[24]

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[23]Rambuss, *Closet Devotions* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1998), pp. 19, 58.

[24]Likewise, although the verb "to know" is not used in "Holy Sonnet: Show me deare Christ, thy spouse," the poem figures its plea for spiritual knowledge in sexual terms—that is, "to *know* (properly to ascertain by *seeing* [naked])." Modern readers may be shocked by Donne's figuring the universal Church as a woman who—contrary to the adulterous wife of the Hebrew prophetic oracles who betrays Yahweh by going to the crossroads and spreading her legs for passers-by (see Frontain, "Redemption Typology in John Donne's 'Batter My

"Before I formed thee in the belly I knew [*yada-teekah*] thee," Yahweh says to the prophet Jeremiah, "and before thou camest forth out of the womb I sanctified thee" (Jeremiah 1:5). Well may Donne play in the *Elegies* and *Songs and Sonets* with the idea of biblical knowledge as a crude sexual double entendre. Ultimately, Donne's desire to know and, finally, to be known hopes to subsume the beloved into the lover and the creature into the Creator; it aspires to an absolute union that is beyond the power of human tongue to tell. Rather, the poet must rely upon a biblical word (*yada*) in order to be subsumed into the biblical Word-made-flesh.

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Heart,'" *Journal of the Rocky Mountain Medieval and Renaissance Association* 8 [1987]: 166–167)—proves "most trew, and pleasing to thee, then / When she'is embrac'd and open to most men" (13–14). But the association is justified by his understanding of *yada* as, ultimately, a sacramental sexuality. Donne collapses other biblical images one into the other when, in his translation of *The Lamentations of Jeremy* 4:8, his speaker says of "the daughters of my people" that:

> They'are darker now then blackness, none can *know*
> Them by the face, as through the streetes they goe,
> For now their skin doth cleave unto their bone,
> And withered, is like to dry wood growne.
> (297–300, emphasis added)

Most obviously, the speaker is saying that the women of his community have been so physically transformed for the worse by the siege of Jerusalem that they have become unrecognizable. But Donne also suggests that their loss of sexual desirability is the result of their failure to know God face to face, as one might in coitus. Conversely, although the speaker of Donne's *Anniversaries* calls Elizabeth Drury "our best, and worthiest booke" (*Second Anniversary*, 320), a description that puts her on a par with the woman of "Elegie: Going to Bed" as a source of revelation, the verb "to know" is used throughout the companion poems without a sexual implication.