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On Donne's "The Canonization"

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It is profoundly flattering for a Spenserian to be asked to address a group of Donne scholars, especially one that considers itself his Society. In fact, your generosity to this errant Spenserian requires some historical justification in that I have until this moment never exposed my views on Donne to any but undergraduates and a few horrified graduate students. I was never swept up in that pernicious wave of enthusiasm for Donne perpetrated by T. S. Eliot and the New Critics, and I must admit now that I am really of C. S. Lewis's party in seeing Donne as a superb but limited poet, and therefore I felt somewhat Satanic as I approached the Society meeting

> . . . then from Pole to Pole
> He views in breadth, and without longer pause
> Down right into the World's first Region throws
> His flight precipitant, and winds with ease
> Through the pure marble Air his oblique way
> Amongst innumerable Stars. . . .[1]

My interpretation of "The Canonization" grows out of two questions: What would John Donne, Anglican priest, think of canonization? And what would that same man even in his alter-ego phase of "Jack" Donne have thought of the transcendent love ascribed to the poem by most

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This essay is a somewhat altered version of a plenary address that I delivered at the Fourth Annual John Donne Society Conference, Gulfport, Mississippi, 18 February 1989.

[1]John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, in *Complete Poems and Major Prose*, ed. Merritt Y. Hughes (New York: Macmillan, 1957), 3.560–565.

modern critics? And the answer to both these questions, in my view, is not very much.

Canonization is specifically a Roman Catholic practice; it would be serious error to suppose that the Dean of St. Paul's would assent to the Bishop of Rome's "definitive sentence" declaring "a particular member of the faithful departed, previously beatified, to have already entered into eternal glory."[2] Such an adherence to papal decree militates against all of Donne's scruples about entering the Anglican priesthood and is not supported by any of his statements on sanctity or the communion of the saints in any of his prose writings, in spite of John Carey's luminous plangency to spread the anxiety of papistical influence all over Donne. I am thinking of Carey's (to me) incredible statement on page 43 of his book:

> The poem achieves this petulant triumph at the expense of Christ's resurrection, which becomes a riddling weapon in the invective: bedmates can 'dye and rise' as well as the Saviour of mankind. But the poem sloughs off its smut in its last two stanzas. The thought of death remains in Donne's mind, and brings its sepulchral comfort. There will be rest in the grave, and something more—official reinstatement: a place in the establishment at last. Donne imagines himself and the girl being invoked as saints in future ages. *The Canonization* is usually reckoned to be much later than Donne's apostasy, but his habits of thought remain Catholic when he feels himself threatened. The intercession of saints was Catholic doctrine, disowned by Anglicans. It calms Donne, however, at the end of his stormy poem, to think of future worshippers praying to him to intercede with God on their behalf.[3]

If we ask who these *worshippers* might be, we will see the problem I am addressing. Surely they are not Roman Catholics whose custom it was, and is, to pray to individual saints, and never so far as I can recall, to couples, no matter how much they loved one another. The Church, for reasons too theologically obvious, has no feast for Joseph and Mary, and

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[2] *Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, ed. F. L. Cross (New York: Oxford University Press, 1957), s. v. "canonization."

[3] Carey, *John Donne: Life, Mind and Art* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), p. 43.

from my scanning of Alban Butler's *Lives of the Saints* there is only one couple listed (Sts. Julian and Basilissa, martyrs, 9 January), and they had vowed perpetual chastity.[4] To jump to the very beginning of Carey's paragraph, it seems to me highly dangerous to achieve any "petulant triumph at the expense of Christ's resurrection." This, in itself, throws the baby out with the bathwater. Hence I am led to conclude that the title of Donne's poem is ironic, and if John T. Shawcross is correct in his observations about the titles of poems, we had better throw this one out as well.[5] It is not even necessary to have the title if one attends to the movement of the poem.

The whimsy of Donne's poem—whether with Donne's title or Donne's non-title, it does not matter—links this poem with the larger problems of promises of immortality made by Renaissance poets to others. Because of our greater familiarity with Shakespeare's *Sonnets*, we assume that sonneteers just out of hand offer immortality to their loved ones, but this is not true because, in fact, only Shakespeare in his *Sonnets* and Samuel Daniel in his *Delia* broach the subject, and Shakespeare stole the idea from Daniel. The classical impetus for this topos of immortality comes from Ovid and Horace, who promise themselves immortality through their harder-than-brass poetry: *Exegi monumentum aere perennius.*[6] Their promise proved true to the extent that we still read both Horace and Ovid, but in the Christian dispensation immortality is granted by Christ's redemption and Good Works according to Catholic doctrine, but for Protestants Good Works do not count, and what kind of good works are being offered by this speaker? Unless we want to withdraw Daniel and Shakespeare and Donne from this dispensation, we had better attend to the world in which they make their claims of granting immortality to others by way of making—at least on the part of Daniel and Shakespeare—the loved one more attentive to their poetic blandishments. The immortality that Shakespeare confers is merely the exposé of a nameless youth, whom we have decided from our disadvantaged point in time must be one of his noble patrons; Daniel

[4]Butler, *Lives of the Saints* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1985).

[5]Shawcross, "But Is It Donne's? The Problem of the Titles on His Poems," *John Donne Journal* 7.2 (1988): 141–150.

[6]Horace, Ode 3.30, in *The Odes and Epodes*, ed. G. P. Goold, Loeb Classical Library 33 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988), line 1.

must drag in Rosamund Clifford, whose complaint, if he will write it, will win over Delia to his plea, although Delia, if she has any head on her will learn from that *Complaint of Rosamund* that she should not succumb to the blandishments of immortality offered by Daniel.[7] Donne in this poem seems to be following the lead of Daniel and Shakespeare, but he intensifies it, in that he offers his unnamed loved one and himself as worthy not only of immortality but also of ritual emulation, enlarging the possibility of canonization beyond anything dreamed of in the hierarchy of the Roman church.

I think also that the kind of transcendent love ascribed to the speaker and his silent mate in this poem is a figment of the twentieth-century imagination because I can find no other example of such transcendence in sixteenth- or early seventeenth-century literature, and there is no point in reminding me of Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra*, because what Janet Adelman has not already done to set that conundrum straight I am more than willing to attempt.[8] Nor, indeed, do I want to hear about those *donne angellicate*, Beatrice and Laura, whom their devoted poets "waltermittied" right out of life. Closer to home is, of course, Spenser's *Amoretti and Epithalamion*, but that presents a problem of discrimination to which I must attend before launching into my reading of Donne's poem.

Spenser does invoke his beloved as "saint" in the *Amoretti*. In the final stanza of the *Epithalamion*, he does see the progeny of his and Elizabeth Boyle's union as enriching the company of the saints:

> Poure out your blessing on vs plentiously,
> And happy influence vpon vs raine,
> That we may raise a large posterity,
> Which from the earth, which they may long possesse,
> With lasting happinesse,
> Vp to your haughty pallaces may mount,
> And for the guerdon of theyr glorious merit
> May heauenly tabernacles there inherit,
> Of blessed Saints for to increase the count.

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[7]Daniel, *Complaint of Rosamund*, in *Poems and a Defence of Ryme*, ed. Arthur Colby Sprague (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1965).

[8]Adelman, *The Common Liar: An Essay on Antony and Cleopatra* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1973), pp. 103–121.

> So let vs rest, sweet loue, in hope of this,
> And cease till then our tymely ioyes to sing,
> The woods no more vs answer, nor our eccho ring.[9]

The difference between Donne's and Spenser's poems is enormous, not poetically where I am willing to grant them parity, but intellectually. Spenser does not speak of canonization, does not speak of his or his wife's salvation, but looks to the hoped-for sanctification of their progeny not as a tribute to their labors but as a fulfillment of God's commandment to increase and multiply his kingdom. The speaker of Donne's poem is resolutely intent on securing his own and his loved one's sanctification.

I am purposely making a distinction here between Spenser's persona in his poem, since we know that the poem is being written for his bride, and Donne's, for whom we have no such biographical information. I fear that Donne is writing this poem out of his own experience and is thinking of his marriage to Ann More, but even if that were true, it would not change the valence of the language, nor does it present a real challenge to my contention that Donne is being ironic in this poem. I hope that we all will be able to agree that both poems are *about* sexual love and that the relation of sanctity to that sexual love is quite different in each.

This, of course, brings up a real problem in the reading of Donne's poetry, or indeed of any Renaissance poetry tainted by biographical interests. Although Spenser makes it clear that he is writing to the unnamed Elizabeth Boyle, we cannot be sure that any other poet is really writing about the woman named in his poem. Even in the cases of Beatrice and Laura, we cannot be sure that they were real women, that they had any real "commerce" with the men who write about them except what the men want to think and write. Perhaps, even if they were real women who had met the poets, these rascally writers could have made up whatever they wanted to say. One can bring the whole problem across the perilous Channel and find similar examples in Wyatt and Anne Boleyn, and Surrey and Geraldine, and Sidney and Lady Rich. The only

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[9]Spenser, *Epithalamion*, in *The Works of Edmund Spenser: A Variorum Edition—The Minor Poems*, vol. 7, part 2, ed. Edwin Greenlaw et al. (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1947), lines 415–426. All quotations of Spenser's verse are from this edition.

major poet for whom we have not found a putative love mate is the Lady of Christ's, whose more than well-researched marital situations seem to have discouraged further prurient interest in the subject. In all these examples, except for the last cited, we expect, we want, a "true love" situation to be the experiential basis of any poem we read. We want to sympathize with our poets; we want them to be happy; we want them to succeed; we want them to manage our affairs, to make us believe everything they tell us because they are the only Emperors of Ice Cream or, at the very least, Peter Quinces at the Clavier, whereas, in fact, we have only Bottomed out as critics. It is our own over-riding desire to "privilege" the poet of our choice that makes us curtsey to one poem and not to another, to call one "sincere" or "true" and another "bawdy" or "ironic." But why could a poet not have done both with the same pen?

What I am really talking about here is the relationship between experience and art, between poet and poem, and for our particular purposes it takes the form of "Jack Donne" vs. "Dr. Donne," who wrote licentious poetry in his youth and serious and/or religious poetry in his maturity (or so the old bromide goes), and to the extent that we have not put off the old bromide we will assign poems we like to married Jack and of those we do not approve to the Jack of all trades.

I must confess that I am part of this disgusting critical mess because I cannot read "A Valediction forbidding mourning" without seeing Ann More addressed before Donne's departure to Germany. It is my favorite Donne poem, and I have in the long distant past made a teaching plea that Elegy 19 also was a poem to Ann More Donne on a night when John had gone to bed first. I may be wrong about these velleities, but I think that most of the criticism about "The Canonization" emerges from a sentimental "privileging" of that poem based on an assessment of its words and statements as morally valid to the audience for whom Donne wrote, an assent that my reading of those words cannot find or justify.

In turning to the poem, I am not going to engage myself in a full-blown New Critical reading because that has been done well enough by my old teacher, Cleanth Brooks, and my old colleague, Clay Hunt, both of whom are blatantly in the camp of the Transcendent Love readers, and both of whom minimize the fact that the speaker of the poem characterizes himself as an old man, a Januarie who does not describe his

Maye except as a pronominal extension of himself: WE.[10] As usual in Renaissance poetry, we hear nothing from the distaff side because the male speaker is intent on describing his love in terms of his own perceptions of his relation to the real world: the court, the church, the world of commerce, the law court, and the military. He is different because of his love, but no lover, young or old, has ever judged his own love actions as having anything to do with the world of society, which assures him that special privilege of privacy so necessary to sexual love. I suppose that this is one of the great achievements of Spenser's *Epithalamion*—that he is the first of the English poets to expose his clean linen in public. Needless to say, we have no comment from Mrs. Spenser.

There seems to be a capitulation on the speaker's part between the first line of the poem: "For Godsake, hold your tongue, and let me love," and the first line of the third stanza: "Call us what you will, wee are made such by love," and it is a capitulation (if we are to credit Donne with a dramatic presentation of a "speaker" in this poem) that deserves some comment.[11]

Donne's lyrics won the critical approbation of the New Critics because of their "dramatic" character as if they were sixteenth-century versions of Browning's *Dramatic Monologues*, which were undoubtedly crammed down the throats of the New Critics by their teachers, the Old Critics, who were younger contemporaries of Browning. There is, however, an important difference between Browning's and Donne's presentations of their dramatic monologists. Browning insists on our total attention being given to the speaker of his poem; we do not have to think about the listener because that listener is the reader. Donne also insists on our total attention to the speaker, but that speaker does not function for the reader unless we imagine the reaction of the listener encased in the poem who has precipitated the monologue. For example,

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[10]See "The Language of Paradox," the first chapter of Brooks's *The Well-Wrought Urn: Studies in the Structure of Poetry* (New York: Harcourt, 1947), pp. 3–21; Hunt, *Donne's Poetry: Essays in Literary Analysis* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1954), pp. 72–95.

[11]Donne, "The Canonization," in *The Complete Poetry of John Donne*, ed. John T. Shawcross (Garden City, NY: Doubleday/Anchor, 1967), lines 1, 19. All quotations of Donne's verse are from this edition.

"The Flea" would not work if we did not imagine the unspeaking lady's reactions in the white spaces of the poem. The logic, the rhetoric, the impact of the poem, disappears unless we have a lady seated quite close to that "lousy" guy. In "The Canonization" we have an equally active, unspeaking audience in the offending, outspoken friend, who precipitates the whole metaphysical conceit of this poem but does not say another word.

The first two stanzas attempt to shut off the unspoken criticism of this unspeaking critical friend as if the speaker were trying to stave off the assault of an employment agency, and it is for this reason that his capitulation (as I called it earlier) in the third stanza is so important both to the structure and to the logic of the poem, if there is a real difference between the two.

Although the speaker empowers (to use a trendy term) the listener to call it as it is, it is the speaker who takes the initiative and supplies enough nomenclature for their love to qualify for the Harold Bloom New Word Award: "flies," "tapers," "eagles," "doves," "phoenix"—and although these words would probably be disqualified from my Bloom contest because of their being basically English, they still deserve more explanation than the critics, new or old, have given.

At this point, I would like to make a slight digression on the subject of reading poems. Old Critics read poems; New Critics read poems *closely* and the term "close reading" has now become a cant term for what we all do, meaning little more than that our interpretation is closer to the "meaning" of the poem than other interpretations. But in point of fact it means that our reading is wrenching the words as close to our own ideological bent as philology will allow whether we name what we are doing Deconstruction, Structuralism, or New Historicism. Our view of how the world works is the basis for what we do with the words of a poem, and therefore a Papist Providentialist, which is how I would characterize my own ideological bent, is going to be at odds with those who cannot "privilege" man or literature with anything more than a political calling. It is not that one sees more than the other, but that we see differently, and thus the flies, tapers, eagles, doves, and phoenixes of this poem mean many things to many readers.

The collocation of these images yearns toward some logical subtext, connecting them all into a larger image pattern that I am not satisfied we have yet found. All attempts at uniting the images fail to take into

account at least one set of images. Cleanth Brooks is good on the self-immolation of flies, tapers, and phoenix, but very weak on eagle and dove. A. B. Chambers has massively exhausted the possibilities of flies but comes to a conclusion about the poem with which I disagree, and Albert Labriola points out many theological Trinitarian possibilities, without convincing me that he has succeeded any better than his predecessors.[12] My main objection to all these readings is that they assume that the speaker is making good points about the validity of his love by introducing these images whereas I read them as undercutting the speaker's position through their incendiary and spunky blasphemy. It seems to me that there should be some progression from flies and tapers through phoenix, joined in common by self-immolation, and if we went from flies and tapers to phoenix, I would agree with Brooks, although I would turn his interpretation upside down by charging the speaker with blasphemy (of a very venial and vulgar order, to be sure) but blasphemy, nonetheless.

Flies and tapers have a catastrophic affinity for each other, and the phoenix is only allowed to do his/her thing, the nexus in each case being fire, meaning death for the fly and rebirth for the phoenix.

What I have in mind is the subtextual logic that so often is apparent in Donne's image patterns. I will give one example of the kind of patterning I have in mind, and from the most famous example of Donne's so-called Metaphysical imagery, the famous compass image at the end of the "A Valediction forbidding mourning":

> Our two souls therefore, *which are one*,
> Though I must go, endure not yet
> A breach, but an expansion,
> Like gold to airy thinness beat.
>
> *If they be two*, they are two such
> As stiff twin compasses are two. . . .
> (21–26, italics mine)

[12]Chambers, "The Fly in Donne's *The Canonization*," *Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 65 (1966): 252–259; Labriola, "Donne's *The Canonization*: Its Theological Context and Its Religious Imagery," *Huntington Library Quarterly* 36 (1973): 327–339.

The logical pattern here is a double conditional, if they be one, gold; if they be two, compasses. The *poetic* problem here is not the statement but the relationship of the two conditional clauses, since the speaker wants to make the two one and the one two, and have it both ways. The poetic connection is, of course, the subtextual (witty, if you want) connection of gold with its alchemical symbol of a circle with a dot in the center which is the very symbol inscribed by the action of the compass, thus linking the two disparate verbal images, and the two conditionals, through a visual image, that does not do violence to the original yoking of "gold" and "compasses."

I find no such "solution" for the images in this stanza of "The Canonization." There may not be one, but the pertinacity of the speaker's response seems to require some such imaginative expansion of logical inference, but no biblical or bestiary source I have found supplies any easy answer. There is no known linking of eagle and dove in spite of Dame Helen Gardner's reference in her edition to the thirty-ninth emblem of Hadrianus Junius in which an eagle hovers over a caged dove.[13] The Latin "posy" attached to the emblem does not seem to fit into the relationship that Donne is adducing in his poem. There is a reference to eagle and dove in Donne's fifth prebend sermon: "I shall see God as a Dove with an olive branch (peace to my soul) or as an Eagle, a vulture to prey," and because of the nature of my reading of this poem I find this an eagle and a dove sent on another mission.[14] The resources of the *Index of Christian Art* yield no example of a linking of eagle and dove, and it will not do for us to suggest a naturalistic explanation of the coupling of power and helplessness without a bow to paternalistic poetics.[15] I am frankly at my wit's end to explain the occurrence of the eagle and the dove in Donne's very witty poem. On the other hand, once when I was preparing Sidney's *Old Arcadia* for a graduate class, I came upon the "device" of Pyrocles, showing off his new dress to his friend, Musidorus, who liked the whole outfit but particularly the jewel that

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[13]Gardner, *John Donne: The Elegies and the Songs and Sonnets* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965), p. 204.

[14]Donne, *Donne's Prebend Sermons*, ed. Janel M. Mueller (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1971), p. 173.

[15]Princeton University's *Index of Christian Art* can be found online at <http://ica.princeton.edu/>.

held the mantle together: "The device whereof was this: an eagle covered with the feathers of a dove, and yet lying under another dove, in such sort as it seemed the dove preyed upon the eagle, the eagle casting up such a look as though the state he was in liked him, though the pain grieved him."[16] The kinkiness of this drag outfit led Sidney to change the "device" in the *New Arcadia* to the less subtle form of Hercules and Omphale. There are many problems with my suggesting Sidney's transvestite prince and his eagle-dove bijou, not the least of which is the problem of my proving that Donne had had access to a manuscript of the *Old Arcadia* and wanted to show that his old coot knew the latest thing about eagles and doves. But as I said earlier, I find myself at my wit's end in dealing with that eagle and that dove.

I am much more at ease with the phoenix image that concludes the stanza because it, as Donne tells us, "hath more wit" (23), for here the obvious double-talk of the speaker really gets him into trouble. The "Phoenix ridle hath more wit / *By us*" (23–24, italics mine), and that added wit is there only to explain a riddle that any common reader would have already known: that the phoenix is a unique bird that reproduces itself through a fiery resurrection, and for this very reason it was applied to Christ and His resurrection, and to Him alone because He too was unique. For a mere mortal to appropriate phoenix-dom to himself and also to confer it on his loved one is to engage in the chop-logic of Hamlet taunting Claudius: ". . . father and mother is man and wife, man and wife is one flesh—so, my mother. . . ,"[17] and that is precisely what Donne's speaker does in the conclusion of the stanza:

> . . . we two being one, are it.
> So, to one neutrall thing both sexes fit.
> Wee dye and rise the same, and prove
> *Mysterious* by this love.
> (24–27, italics mine)

The hand-in-glove metaphor of sexuality, the puerile reliance on the phallic motion of rising and falling, the "Look, Ma, no hands" syndrome

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[16]Sidney, *The Old Arcadia*, ed. Katherine Duncan-Jones (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), p. 24.

[17]Shakespeare, *The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark*, in *The Riverside Shakespeare*, ed. G. Blakemore Evans (Boston: Houghton, 1974), 4.3.51–52.

of public declamation of private talents, leads only to the assertion that they "prove / *Mysterious* by this love" (26–27, italics mine). Clay Hunt writes, with characteristic vigor:

> Finally, the word 'mysterious' . . . has, as it always does in Donne's work, a specific reference to religious 'mysteries'—that is, to spiritual phenomena, like the Resurrection, which violate the laws governing the physical world and which are beyond the comprehension of Natural Reason.[18]

Apparently so, but it should be pointed out that the Resurrection is a physical phenomenon whose mystery is not circumscribed by the fact that it did not behave scientifically. Hunt provides no footnote to his observation, but the Donne concordance shows that he uses the word "mysterious" only twice in his poetry, here and in line 24 of "The Primrose."[19] The *Oxford English Dictionary* shows an even more interesting fact about this word: that its earliest occurrences are in the 1620's and that most of the examples for each usage come later from Milton.[20] I am not a philologist and do not want to argue validity through the *OED*, but surely a newfangled word, which Donne's usage here obviously is, required a pause from the early reader, which no later critic has seemed to grant it. I wonder what would happen today if Donne rewrote his lines with a mind to alliteration: "We die and rise the same, and prove / Privileged by this love."

I hope that this sudden incursion into modern critical parlance will make the point that I want: "mysterious" is a loaded term, perhaps even a buzz-word in the becoming. We as modern readers flatter ourselves that we know what Donne was doing with his progression of the mysteries in this stanza, but we deceive ourselves because Donne's speaker's blatantly sexual innuendoes about the points of comparison between his love and the case of the phoenix automatically casts the comparison out on the grounds that he is merely playing verbal games: Christ rose from death; the phoenix is said to rise from its own ashes, and so do I, along with this lady I was telling you about. I think that we as readers are meant to be

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[18]Hunt, p. 78.

[19]Homer Carroll Combs and Zay Rusk Sullens, *A Concordance to the English Poems of John Donne* (New York: Haskell House, 1969), s. v. "mysterious."

[20]*Oxford English Dictionary*, s. v. "mysterious," adj. and n.

shocked at the bravado, and I am deeply puzzled at some of the readings of this stanza that think that Donne is getting to the sublime, eternal verities of sexual and divine love. I, as a Spenserian, cannot accept this nonsense because Spenser had already done that in 1595 when Donne was but a young nipper of twenty-three. I am thinking, of course, of the *Amoretti* 68—the Easter sonnet—in which the Resurrection empowers his love:

> So let vs loue, deare loue, like as we ought,
> loue is the lesson which the Lord vs taught.
> (13–14)

This almost imbecilic monosyllabic couplet is a much braver metaphysical coupling than Donne could ever allow himself. Spenser is saying that the Resurrection is the enabling act that permits and informs his human love. In spite of its totally understated diction it is a much more startling statement than that of Donne's speaker in *The Canonization* because Spenser is stating positively that the Resurrection is both the teaching example and the moral exemplar of his love as the rhyme words "ought" and "taught" show. No other poet whom I have read makes such an explicit connection between the Resurrection and his own love, and hence I wonder why no Donnian has ever thought of making the comparison because the difference between the two is so clear intellectually that we might have been spared a lot of misplaced critical sympathy for Donne's speaker. Spenser's speaker is presenting the Resurrection as an exemplar of love to his lady; Donne's speaker is presenting the dying and rising power of the Resurrection as an analogy to his own sexual ability to an unidentified adversary. The difference is enormous. In Spenser, it is a genuine Metaphysical analogy; in Donne, it is merely metaphysical wit. In Spenser, we need not seek a new metaphysic of transcendent human love; in Donne, we do. This has nothing to do with intellectual belief on either's part; it has all to do with the use to which each poet puts the analogy. The one wants us to believe the analogy; the other wants us to see the misuse his speaker is making. This point becomes even more obvious if we attend to those last short lines of each stanza, if read in succession:

> So you will let me love
> Though she and I do love
> Mysterious by this love
> Us *Canoniz'd* for Love
> A patterne of your love

These lines are really a sales promotion of the speaker's assertion of doing-his-own-thing, from statement of desire in stanza one, to minor justification of desire in stanza two, to riddling justification in stanza three, to socially redeeming justification in stanza four, to international sell-out in stanza five. Wilbur Sanders, in one of the most perceptive commentaries on the poem, one of the few that deals with the word "mysterious," calls Donne's use of the word "bottomlessly equivocal," and continues:

> That goes not only for the exorbitant substance of the claims, nor for the equivocal manner merely, but also for the grounds alleged—because Donne appears to argue the quasi-divine status of the lovers on the preposterous grounds that they re-enact the resurrection of Christ ('Wee dye and rise the same'). And that proposition, of course, rests on a pun—no less excruciating for its shop-soiled condition—on the secondary meaning of 'dye' (to pass away in sexual ecstasy). He is thus impertinently confounding mere carnality with a prime mystery of religion.[21]

I totally agree with Sanders on this point because I cannot buy a Donne at any point of his life confusing such basic matters or thinking them "mysterious."

In the fourth and fifth stanzas, Donne pushes his speaker into wilder fantasies, derived from the blasphemies of the third. "Wee can dye by it, if not live by love" (28) rejects the punning blasphemy of the preceding stanza by returning to the grim reality of death as we all will know it, but instead of facing up to this reality to come, the speaker runs through a gamut of literary types that might apply to this love: legend, verse, chronicle, sonnets, hymns—but it should be pointed out that this retreat

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[21]Sanders, *John Donne's Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1971), p. 22.

into literary criticism is no less a withdrawal than the abjuration of the whole social world in stanzas one and two. The speaker nowhere in the poem defends his love except as it is in opposition to the privileged quotidian existence of his readers. Even the bee in amber is a dead bee, and Donne's speaker's bravado gives up life in this stanza, as he had given up the chance for success in life in stanzas one and two. Donne's double conditionals should always be heeded. Here we have Die if not Live and If no Hearse yet Verse, yet no one but the speaker has opposed success to love or death to love, and it is only he who takes up the bleak end predicted by his spirited rejection of all options that might have led to an appropriate (for him) tombstone. It is only he who suggests that they might be "unfit for tombes and hearse" (29) and only he who suggests the alternate "po'mouth" literary route. May I at this point also remind you that the word "legend" is also a loaded word in this poem. The *OED* cites Chaucer in the Prologue to *The Legend of Good Women* as the first instance of this word being used in a secular sense, and I might add the titles of each book of Spenser's *The Faerie Queene* as another early use, and therefore Donne is here deliberately introducing the word, suggesting the *Legenda aurea*, that ever-popular Lives of the Saints.[22] Again, it must be noted that it is the speaker who suggests that their legend may not be appropriate. If we stop to consider why this sainted couple may not be fit for tomb and hearse and even more importantly why this lack should be supplied by poetry, we will have to ask hard questions about sanctity and its relation to poetry, and vice versa. Why should the speaker have already converted his loved one into a legend? It is their legend and not they that may be unfit for tomb and hearse, but even if they prove not to be worthy of secular history ("no peece of Chronicle" [31]), they will accomplish something that has never been accomplished in another literary form—the sonnet.

One of the outstanding characteristics of the sonnet sequence is the unremitting voice of the poet-lover begging for his loved one's grace; sonnet sequences are the last preserve of unremitting male desire, and so it is with some suspicion that I read "We'll build in sonnets pretty roomes" (32). "We" is not part of sonnet syntax, nor is the prospect of pretty but separate "designer" rooms. Donne may have in mind here the further pun on the Italian "stanze," that is, "rooms," but he certainly is

[22] *Oxford English Dictionary*, s. v. "legend," n.

not implying that such rooming accommodation is the height of literary creativity. What is the opposition between "well-wrought urne" (33) and "halfe-acre tombes" (34)? Does "well-wrought urne" refer back to the pretty rooms of the sonnets? In spite of the critical solemnities paid to that phrase, owing in part for the last fifty years to Cleanth Brooks's choice of it as the title for his very influential book, the "well-wrought urne" seems to me nothing more than a well-wrought irony—not only because of the repetition of "well" twice in that line but also because of what that urn may contain: "the greatest ashes" (34). I have already commented on the fact that the speaker converts his life into a legend before its end, but here he is suggesting that there is a hierarchy of dust, that great equalizer. Ashes are the material remains of great and low, and so the point about "well-wrought urnes" vs. "halfe-acre tombes" for any dust is absurd because it disallows the very values for which that life was honored here in this life. Ashes are honored because of the life that once incorporated them. Thus, I find the conclusion of the stanza, in which "by . . . hymnes" (35), of which I have heard not a note, "all shall approve / Us *Canoniz'd* for Love" (35–36) a let-down and not a triumph. Donne has moved his speaker consistently away from the interior definition of a love that might possibly unite him and his loved one in a way that would merit the blasphemy of this poem. As much as he isolates that love from the ordinary social world in the first two stanzas of the poem, he redefines that world into a universal cheering section in the fourth and fifth stanzas, with the very dubious trophy of canonization.

The fifth stanza is the speaker's fantasy about the prayer of the universal cheering section that he himself has created, and it completes the narcissistic dream. No amount of reverence should turn any hermitage into a duplex. The whole world cannot be epitomized in the eyes of lovers no matter how well they play the childhood game of Owl. I am aware of the beauty of the third line: "You, to whom love was peace, that now is rage" (39), but I have serious problems with the syntax and diction. Am I to suppose that the love described in this poem was ever peaceful? And I wonder whether the "that" refers to "peace" or to "love." Is the speaker suggesting that his love was "peace," while his invented universal cheering section is relegated to love as "rage?" Or is he unknowingly deconstructing his argument by promulgating the previous reading, whereas Donne is supplying the possibility of the rage of

damnation? I am troubled by that line but find some corroborative evidence for the latter reading in the final two lines of the poem:

> Countries, Townes, Courts: Beg *from above*
> A patterne of your love!
> (44–45, italics mine)

What I have called the "universal cheering section" has been pretty well consolidated into the very social units that the speaker has eschewed in the earlier stanzas of the poem (individuals need not apply), but I am drawn to the ambiguity of that phrase "Beg from above." All readings I know translate it "beg from heaven," but I wonder if Donne is not playing wittily with his invented speaker's fantasy and sees that this equally-invented cheering section is literally begging "from above" the now deceased lovers, who are buried beneath the earth on which these putative hierophants stand.

I am reminded of a brilliant moment in the BBC production of *Hamlet* starring Sir Derek Jacobi when Horatio and Marcellus finally catch up with Hamlet (1.5). As the ghost from the cellarage reiterates Hamlet's plea for them to swear allegiance, Horatio and Marcellus look up at the unexpected voice, while Hamlet keeps his gaze constantly down at the platform from under which the voice is emerging. This short scene catches the ambiguity of the provenance of the ghost and suggests the ambiguity that I find in the last two lines of Donne's poem. The speaker of Donne's poem will never understand this ambiguity, and the universal cheering section would immediately change parties, but we must remember that they are the creation of the speaker and thus cannot know what merely dead thing they are invoking. The poem that we know as "The Canonization" is a triumph of Donne's ability to realize the aberrant fantasies of human love.

Even with Donne's so-called preoccupation with hoisting his love on his own petard, through statuary ("The Extasie") or relics ("The Relique," "The Funerall") or public display ("The Sunne Rising," "The good-morrow"), the voyeuristic reader of all these exposés is not, I think, meant to be drawn into any spiritual development of the man who wrote these poems. I do not think that personal experience or personal commitment had anything to do with their creation anymore than I think that those two qualities had anything to do with the creation of

Shakespeare's plays or poems. Donne's poems are not the keys with which he unlocked his heart because that heart was enshrouded long before he assumed his shroud in a profoundly Christian awareness of what human life was and in what multitudinous ways we can deceive ourselves about the import of our most cherished wishes. That was Donne's illumination about the nature of human love, and it got him into some little difficulty with Ben Jonson as recorded by William Drummond in those well-known lines on the *Anniversaries*: "That Donne's *Anniversaries* was profane and full of blasphemies; that he told Mr. Donne if it had been written of the Virgin Mary it had been something; to which he answered that he described the idea of a woman."[23] Even in paid-for elegy Donne allegorizes, universalizes, does not number the streaks of the tulips.

We spend so much time trying to make the poets our friends that we tend to forget that they are also our teachers and that we are often reluctant to learn the lessons of the masters. In the case of this poem, we as critics have been very wayward in canonizing him for all the wrong reasons. We have rightly canonized this poem but not for well-wrought reasons.[24]

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[23] *Ben Jonson's Conversations with William Drummond of Hawthornden* (1619), ed. R. F. Patterson (London: Blackie and Son, 1923).

[24] I am indebted to Julia Walker for bibliographical advice and to Dayton Haskin for correcting several factual and typographical errors in the initial version of this paper.