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Dar La Luz: Illuminating John Donne's "A nocturnall upon *S. Lucies* day, Being the shortest day"

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A nocturnall upon *S. Lucies* day, Being the shortest day" is one of John Donne's most puzzling and elusive poems, and it is precisely this elusive quality that has captured the interest of so many scholars and critics. The questions looming largest over the poem are those of the subject: who is the woman being mourned on St. Lucy's Day, and does this hold any significance for an interpretation of the poem? Some scholars have suggested that the poem is written about Donne's patron, Lucy, Countess of Bedford.[1] Herbert J. C. Grierson writes that because Donne's "Nocturnall" and "Twickenham Garden" are so similar, and because the available evidence seems to point to the Countess as the subject of "Twickenham Garden," so too must she be the subject of the "Nocturnall."[2] Despite these arguments, and the obvious connection of the Countess's name and the sainted Lucy of the poem, other scholars have suggested the poem is about the death of Anne More, John Donne's wife.[3] According to John Carey, "if Donne's Lucy

[1]Herbert J. C. Grierson, *Donne: Poetical Works* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), p. xxi; and Evelyn Hardy, *Donne, A Spirit in Conflict* (London: Folcroft Press, 1969), p. 127, have suggested the poem is about the Countess.

[2]Grierson, p. xxi.

[3]John T. Shawcross, "Donne's 'A Nocturnall Upon S. Lucie's Day,'" *Explicator* 23 (1965): 56; John Carey, *John Donne: Life, Mind, and Art* (Boston: Faber and Faber, 1981), p. 92; Louis L. Martz, *The Wit of Love: Donne, Carew, Cashaw, Marvell* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1969), 194–195; Helen Gardner, "A Nocturnall upon St. Lucy's Day, being the

poem is about a real dead woman, then his wife is the only candidate worth considering. She alone, of the women we know he knew, involved him deeply enough to inspire this desolate utterance."[4] The scholars who think the poem concerns Anne More have argued that the words of the poem evoke a personal quality which suggests that Donne felt deeply about the subject. Still others have argued against a biographical reading of the poem altogether because, as Julia M. Walker writes, "such readings (in addition to requiring more than a fair share of critical imagination) of necessity deny the poet's imaginative ability to write from any perspective other than that of a rigidly chronological diary."[5] Even though the scholarly debate surrounding the "Nocturnall" is a greatly contested one, each of these scholars draws upon a shared pool of evidence dating back to England in the seventeenth century. What they are leaving out is the possibility offered by other languages: the possibility that, because Donne's mastery of language was not limited to English, he employed his wit in incorporating phrases and colloquialisms of other tongues—including Spanish—in his poetry. Recognizing the possibility of a cross-lingual pun not noted by previous scholars, but at the heart of the "Nocturnall" and essential to its wit, enriches our reading of the poem and suggests the likelihood that the poem's subject is Anne More.

Although the suggestion that Donne is punning in Spanish as well as English in "A nocturnall upon *S. Lucies* day, Being the shortest day" is

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Shortest Day" in *Poetic Traditions of the English Renaissance*, ed. Maynard Mack and George deForest Lord (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1982), p. 181; Graham Roebuck, "'Glimmering lights': Anne, Elizabeth, and the Poet's Practice," in *John Donne's "desire of more": The Subject of Anne More Donne in His Poetry*, ed. M. Thomas Hester (Newark, NJ: University of Delaware Press, 1996), p. 173; William Zunder, *The Poetry of John Donne: Literature and Culture in the Elizabethan and Jacobean Period* (Totowa, NJ: Barnes & Noble Books, 1982), p. 44; Maureen Sabine, "No Marriage in Heaven: John Donne, Anne Donne, and the Kingdom Come," in *John Donne's "desire of more,"* p. 245; Kate Gartner Frost, "'Preparing towards her': Contexts of *A Nocturnall upon S. Lucies Day*," in *John Donne's "desire of more,"* p. 166; and Achsah Guibbory, "Fear of 'loving more': Death and the Loss of Sacramental Love," in *John Donne's "desire of more,"* p. 207.

[4]Carey, p. 92.

[5]Walker, "Anne More: A Name Not Written," in *John Donne's "desire of more,"* p. 93.

new, the observation that Donne puns in other languages in his work is not. M. Thomas Hester has explored Donne's wit in both English and Latin in the one piece of writing where Anne More is unquestionably the subject—the epitaph Donne commissioned upon his wife's death. Hester writes that, in the epitaph, "the rich variety and conciseness of the Latin begin[s] to drift into English puns, its timeless stability seemingly infected with the current and timely multivocal puns of the living tongue in imitation of the poem's confronting the mortal consequences of Anne's devotion."[6] Donne engages in cross-lingual wordplay in this memorial to his wife when he commemorates his dead beloved in a dead tongue. He traversed the boundary between English and Latin on the occasion of Anne More's death, using a cross-lingual trope to enrich the wit of the epitaph; perhaps he did the same with the English and Spanish languages in the "Nocturnall," if the poem was occasioned by the death of his wife.

Donne was no stranger to the Spanish language or to the rich opportunities that a cross-lingual pun would permit, and Evelyn Hardy has suggested that he was most likely influenced by his grandfather, John Heywood, who had translated the Spanish *Celestina* to great acclaim, and by his uncles, who taught him a love of Spanish literature. Donne "may even have been chosen to go on the expedition to Cadiz and the Azores because of his knowledge of Spanish," Hardy writes, "and we know that, among his friends, Wotton, Woodward, Herbert and Ben Jonson were all proficient in that language."[7] Donne's combined experiences in Spain during the Cadiz expedition, and contact with his Spanish-translating grandfather and his Spanish-proficient friends, point to a level of familiarity with the language that would enable Donne to engage in cross-lingual wordplay in his works. Izaak Walton urges, in fact, that after traveling for some years in Spain and Italy, Donne returned to England "perfect in their Languages."[8] Dennis Flynn has shown that Donne utilized a cross-lingual pun in his portrait and chosen motto:

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[6]Hester, "'*Faeminae lectissimae*': Reading Anne Donne," in *John Donne's "desire of more,"* p. 25.

[7]Hardy, *Donne, A Spirit in Conflict* (London: Folcroft Press, 1969), 180–181.

[8]Walton, *The Life and Death of Dr. Donne, late Deane of St. Pauls London"* (1640), in *John Donne, Poetry & Prose, with Izaac Walton's Life*, ed. H. W. Garrod (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1946), p. xxi.

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"*Antes muerto que mudado* [Rather dead than changed]."[9] The Spanish motto in itself is a sort of cross-lingual pun—it came from a romance read in the 1580s entitled *Los Siete Libros de la Diana* [The Seven Books of the Diana] by Montemayor, where the line is ascribed to Diana, a shepherd's mistress. The irony in the motto is that Diana is not, in fact, constant, and thus Donne, too, is not sooner dead than changed.[10] The wit of this chosen motto is revealed only when one takes into account the Spanish pun. Walton did not recognize this wordplay (he translated the motto as "How much shall I be chang'd before I am chang'd") and thus mistranslated the motto in his biography of Donne as a serious comment on the poet's sober view of life.[11] Donne's conscious choice to use a tongue-in-cheek motto that was, in itself, a cross-lingual pun parallels the way in which he enriched the wit of Anne's epitaph by means of a cross-lingual Latin pun. Donne carried this kind of cross-lingual wordplay into his creation of "A nocturnall upon *S. Lucies* day"; taking these puns into account illuminates the wit of the poem, and supports the likelihood that its subject is Anne More.

The crucial wordplay in the "Nocturnall" involves a Spanish term—"*dar la luz*"—which is the Spanish expression for the verb "to give birth."[12] Translated literally, "*dar la luz*" means "to give the light": "*dar*" means "to give," "*luz*" means "light." The term existed during John Donne's time, as the *Covarrubias Diccionario*: *Tesoro de la lengua Castellana o Espanola*, compiled by Sebastián de Covarrubias Orozco (1539–1619), attests: "*Alumbrar. (dar lumbre). En las paridas, alumbrar, es echar la luz fuera del vientre la criatura, que estava en el como en una mazmorra oscura y sin luz*": To illuminate. (To give birth). To give birth, to illuminate, is to push the baby, that was, as though in a dark dungeon devoid of light, out of the womb into the light.[13] Donne's "A nocturnall

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[9]Flynn, *John Donne and the Ancient Catholic Nobility* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1996), p. 2.

[10]Flynn, p. 2.

[11]Flynn, p. 1.

[12]*Diccionario de uso del Espanol*, ed. Maria Moliner (Madrid: Gredos, 1998), s.v. "*Dar.*"

[13]*Covarrubias Diccionario*: *Tesoro de la lengua Castellana o Espanola*, ed. Sebastián de Covarrubias Orozco (Madrid: Turner, 1977), s.v. "*Alumbrar. (dar lumbre).*"

upon *S. Lucies* day" is preoccupied with images of light yielding darkness, and the extinction of light. The speaker says: "The Sunne is spent, and now his flasks / Send forth light squibs, no constant rayes" (3–4).[14] He refers to St. Lucy's Day as "the yeares midnight, and it is the dayes" (1), and refers to the subject as the speaker's "Sunne" (37). As Kate Gartner Frost writes: "The 'Nocturnall' is dominated by darkness and deprivation . . . [it] communicates in images of light—or rather the lack of it."[15] This poem, dealing so much with darkness, reverses the process of birth described by the phrase *dar la luz.* Instead of a movement from the darkness and death of the womb to light and life, the "Nocturnall" moves from life to darkness and death. The emotional trajectory of the poem, too, suggests the speaker's despair, a despair that would be particularly appropriate if he were mourning the loss of his beloved in a birth that yielded not new life, but death. Anne More, who died after giving birth to Donne's stillborn child on 15 August 1617, seems to be a fitting subject to have occasioned the despair expressed by Donne's speaker.[16]

When we take into account the Spanish term for childbirth, we see Donne playing with the colloquial variations of the term "*dar la luz.*" Indeed, a popular Spanish adage during Donne's time urged, "*Mala noche, y parir hija*": A bad (or evil, ill-fated) night, and the woman gives birth to a girl.[17] The misogynistic overtones of the proverb clash with the poem's reverent attitude toward the beloved woman, yet "Nocturnall" does indeed describe one such "ill-fated night" as the speaker considers the "long nights festivall" (42) that is "both the yeares, and the dayes deep midnight" (45). Significantly, Anne More and John Donne's stillborn child was a daughter, as a letter from a Frenchman in London reveals: "*elle accouchee, Dimanche matin, d'vne fille qui a peyne vesquit autant de minutes* [she was delivered, Sunday evening, of a daughter, who

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[14]Lines from "A nocturnall upon *S. Lucies* day, Being the shortest day" and other Donne poems are from *The Complete Poetry of John Donne*, ed. John T. Shawcross (Garden City, NY: Doubleday/Anchor Books, 1967) and will be cited parenthetically in the text.

[15]Frost, p. 150.

[16]R. C. Bald, *John Donne, A Life* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970), p. 324.

[17]*Covarrubias Diccionario: Tesoro de la lengua Castellana o Espanola*, s.v. "*Parir.*"

scarcely lived a few minutes]."[18] It is not hard to imagine that when Donne wrote his "Nocturnall," he might well have had these Spanish phrases in mind.

That the central wit of the poem turns on "*dar la luz*" in its imagery of an inverted birth heightens the irony inherent in the reference to St. Lucy in the poem. Lucy, the saint associated with light, has her festival day on 13 December, the darkest day of the year in the old Julian calendar. The "Nocturnall" begins: "Tis the yeares midnight, and it is the dayes, / *Lucies*, who scarce seaven houres herself unmaskes" (1–2). The inversion of light and darkness in St. Lucy and her festival day is reinforced by the inversion of light and life associated with a failed birth. John T. Shawcross suggests that Donne wished to stress the "ironic lack of light on the day which is dedicated to the saint whose name derives from the Latin *lux* (light)," and that the poem need not have been written on 13 December, but instead was probably written on "her Eve" (44), or the Eve of St. Lucy's Day, 12 December.[19] It seems more likely, however, that the dates referred to in the poem may themselves suggest that Anne More's death in childbirth was the occasion that lay behind the poem's description of an inverted birth and an inverted and ironic lack of light. The numbers 12 and 7 ("*Lucies*, who scarce seaven houres herself unmaskes" [2]) take on added significance if we recall that Anne died seven days after *dando la luz* to Donne's twelfth child.[20] The central wordplay on *dar la luz* is at work in the very name of the saint (Lucy) upon whose day the poem is ostensibly written, but is present in an ironic, reversed sense, much like the reverse birth trope, because the saint whose day is about light has her festival on the darkest of the year.

The play on *dar la luz* not only heightens the ironic wit of the inverted birth and inverted light tropes, but also deepens and personalizes the alchemical imagery of the poem, which expresses an inverted alchemical process. The Renaissance vocabulary of alchemy was interwoven with the language of marriage and birth. For example, the goal of alchemy was to combine the seeds of the male (sulfur) and female (argent vive) elements (which were also called the "bride" and

[18]PRO SP 14, vol. 92, no. 107, quoted in Bald, p. 324. I am grateful to M. Thomas Hester for information regarding this footnote, and for the translation.

[19]Shawcross, p. 56.

[20]Shawcross, p. 56.

"bridegroom") in a "chemical wedding," where, after undergoing the processes of death, dissolution, and putrefaction, the Philosopher's Stone was "conceived, generated, and born."[21] Paracelsus describes this alchemical process using the terms shared by both the processes of giving birth to a human child, and giving birth to the "philosophical child," or Philosopher's Stone:

> Take Philosopher's Mercury . . . dissolve this with its wife, that is to say, with quick mercury, so that the woman may dissolve the man. . . . Then, just as the husband loves his wife and she her husband, the Philosopher's Mercury pursues the quick mercury with the most supreme love, and their nature is moved with the greatest affection towards us. . . . As soon as you see the woman take a black colour, know for a certainty that she has conceived and become pregnant . . . this is the first sign and the key of this whole work and Art.[22]

Although the male and female elements "die" and decompose together, new life results: the birth of the Stone, and the Elixir of Life, which grants immortality. The regenerative end of alchemy is denied in Donne's "Nocturnall," however, because the speaker's alchemy is a reversed alchemy. The speaker is "every dead thing, / In whom love wrought new Alchimie" (12–13). While alchemy is a process of creation, yielding new life (the birth of the Stone), and immortality (the Elixir of Life itself), love's "new Alchimie" has produced in the speaker not eternal life, but eternal death, reversing the process of birth.

Readers have noted the significant alchemical imagery in the "Nocturnall," but to explain the specific significance of this imagery to the speaker's despair that dominates the poem we must take into account Donne's cross-lingual pun on *dar la luz*, which imparts a sober quality to the "Nocturnall" that differs from his usual irreverent use of alchemical tropes in other poems, such as "Love's Alchymie." Donne's invocation of

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[21]Lyndy Abraham, *A Dictionary of Alchemical Imagery* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), s.v. "Chemical wedding," "Philosopher's Stone," and "Womb."

[22]Aureolus Phillipus Theophrastus Bombast, of Hohenheim, called Paracelsus, *The Hermetic and Alchemical Writings*, trans. Arthur Edward Waite, 2 vols. (New York: University Books, 1967), 1:86.

the Spanish expression enables the alchemical imagery of the "Nocturnall" to express his despair over the loss of his "bride" (Anne) in a process which should have resulted in new life (the birth of a child, or in alchemy, the birth of the "philosophical child"), but instead yielded lasting death and darkness. The conflation of marriage and birth imagery in alchemy is crucial to the wit of the poem, and is conveyed in the image of the alembic, or limbeck, which connects birth, death, and the womb as the place where both birth and death can occur. In alchemy, a "limbeck" was the term for a "generic circular vessel, the vas rotundum, in which the alchemist carries out all the operations of the opus," and whose alchemical symbol was the womb.[23] The name of the limbeck changed according to the chemical process occurring within it: during the "chemical wedding" of the "bride and bridegroom," the limbeck was expressed as "the conjugal bed in which the lovers unite;" and during the putrefaction stage, where the male and female elements (sulfur and argent vive, the chemical "lovers") "die" in order to conceive the Stone, the limbeck is represented as a "grave, coffin, or prison."[24] The womb/limbeck is both the marriage bed (place of conception, which leads to bringing the child out of the darkness of the womb into the light), and the place where the dead are "enterr'd" in the grave, the place of death and darkness (8). When the speaker laments that "by love's limbecke," he is "the grave / Of all, that's nothing," he recalls Covarrubias's "dungeon" of the womb in describing an inverted birth, and an inverted alchemy (as the matter held in the limbeck during the putrefaction stage is said to be "captured in a dungeon or in prison"), by way of a single alchemical term that combines the two under the trope of an ironic *dar la luz* (21–22).[25]

Furthermore, he describes the "new" alchemy in terms that echo the cross-lingual wordplay on the Spanish term for childbirth by conflating alchemical vocabulary with the vocabulary of procreation. The speaker says: "For his art did expresse / A quintessence even from nothingnesse / From dull privations, and lean emptinesse" (14–16). "Quintessence," or fifth essence, was the supposed substance of the heavenly bodies that was

[23] *A Dictionary of Alchemical Imagery*, s.v. "Alembic, Limbecke" and "Womb."
[24] *A Dictionary of Alchemical Imagery*, s.v. "Womb."
[25] *A Dictionary of Alchemical Imagery*, s.v. "Prison."

present in all things and could be extracted by alchemical processes.[26] The new alchemy wrought on the speaker by "love's art" resulted in the extraction of this essence from "nothing," a reversal of the typical alchemical process where the quintessence is extracted from something (as it is present in all things). This reverse alchemy is also a process of childbirth because the quintessence was born of "nothing," or "no-thing," a term which, in the Renaissance, could connote female genitalia; for instance, Shakespeare's "Sonnet 20" puns on nature "'adding one thing to my purpose nothing,' (i.e. a penis to the vaginal *nothing*)," and Ophelia's profession to "think nothing" (*Hamlet* 3.2.112) spurs Hamlet's quip: "That's a fair thought to lie between maids' legs."[27] The birth of something from nothing in the "Nocturnall" is much like the birth of a child from "no-thing," or the birth canal. Thus, the central wordplay of *dar la luz* reiterates the perverse alchemy in Donne's poem that led not to procreation and regeneration but to degeneration and death.

The conflation of alchemical and procreation language is also evinced in the description of how love "ruin'd" the speaker, leaving him dead and alone. The word "ruined" in alchemy describes "a state preliminary to rebirth"; in a properly functioning alchemical process, the substance would be "ruin'd" only to be reborn in the Elixir of Life.[28] The new alchemy wrought on the speaker is also a rebirth, but a rebirth into death, and is described in terms of a dissolution into darkness: "I am re-begot / Of absence, darknesse, death; things which are not" (17–18). This sequence of words parallels the process of dissolution in alchemy even while paralleling the process of childbirth. The speaker is "re-begot" first of "absence" (the absent female element, the beloved, who has died); and secondly of "darkness," which was known in alchemy as the "nigredo," or "black stage," but also as the "death of the king," which was compared with Christ's crucifixion.[29] The terms "absence" and "darkness" relate to *dando la luz*. The beloved, in "absence" as she will no longer beget children, will never again bring the "child out of the darkness into the

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[26] *Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd ed., s.v. "Quintessence."

[27] Gordon Williams, *A Glossary of Shakespeare's Sexual Language*, (London: The Athlone Press, 1997), p. 219.

[28] Astley Cooper Partridge, *John Donne: Language and Style* (London: Andre Deutsch, 1978), p. 89.

[29] *A Dictionary of Alchemical Imagery*, s.v. "Nigredo."

light." Likewise, there is no hope for the "darkness" of the womb, or "Crucifixion" from which Christ was supposed to be reborn to grant everlasting light and life into the world. In addition to being re-begot of "absence" and "darkness," the speaker is also re-begot of "death," which, during the Renaissance, could signify the female orgasm that was thought to be required for the conception of a child. The reverse alchemical and childbirth imagery intertwine in Donne's bitter wordplay on *dar la luz* to yield the darkness, death, and desolation that pervade the speaker's lament in the poem.

Recognition of Donne's cross-lingual wordplay also illuminates the ironic use of the word "spirit" in "Nocturnall" to express a despondency that has struck many readers as personal in nature. Donne heightens the absolute negation of being that is wrought on the speaker by love's new alchemy by contrasting it with "all" other things which have a presence of being, or a spirit: "All others, from all things, draw all that's good / Life, soule, forme, spirit, whence they beeing have" (21–20). In alchemical terms, the word "spirit" or "balsam/balme" has a specific meaning related both to light and life. As Paracelus writes:

> First of all, then, with regard to the death of man, it should be understood that, beyond a doubt, it is nothing else but . . . the evanescence of his balsam, the extinction of his natural light, and the entire separation of the three substances, body, soul, and spirit, and the return to his mother's womb.[30]

The "return to his mother's womb" of which Paracelsus speaks is akin to the process of birth that Covarrubias describes as he defines *dar la luz*, but reversed. A return to the mother's womb would be moving from the light back into "a dark dungeon devoid of light," and death. This reversal of birth and light as related to the alchemical meaning of "spirit" takes on added significance if we remember that "spirit" during the Renaissance also could mean seminal fluid, the male component, like the male element of alchemy, necessary to create new life.[31] The fact that "spirit" appears in its varying forms so often in the poem (it first appears as the

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[30]Paracelsus, p. 139.

[31]J. Barry Webb, *Shakespeare's Erotic Word Usage: The Body, Its Parts, Analogues and Images: A Lexicon* (Hastings, England: Cornwallis Press, 1989), s.v. "Spirit."

world's vital fluid, its "sap" in line 5, is repeated as "The generall balme [or balsam] th'hydroptique earth hath drunk" [6], and as the "Life, soule, forme, spirit" [20] which directly parallels Paracelsus's three substances of "body, soul, and spirit") shows that the poem is preoccupied with the way in which spirit, light, life, and birth are intertwined.[32]

The entwined terminology of human procreation, alchemy, and light allows the speaker to move from one inverted creation process to another—the inverted Creation of the world: "oft did we grow, / To be two Chaosses, when we did show / Care to ought else" (24–26). The two chaoses describe the primordial chaos, or first nothing, of Genesis, from which the world was created, which Donne himself described in one of his sermons by saying: "He created thee, *ex nihilo*, he gave thee a being, there's matter of exaltation, and yet all this from nothing."[33] "*Dar la luz*" has resonance here, for in the Bible's description of Genesis, "the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep" until God said, "'Let there be light'" and "divided the light from the darkness."[34] Out of darkness came light in the first Creation, but in the "Nocturnall," darkness, not light, results from *dando la luz.*

The reverse Creation imagery of the two chaoses recalls the flood imagery of Genesis: "Oft a flood / Have wee two wept, and so / Drownd the whole world, us two" (22–24). Tears and floods are significant in alchemy, too, for "the dead, united body of the lovers is said to exude sweat or tears as it is distilled in the alembic,"[35] creating the "flood," which is a symbol of the dissolution and putrefaction of the Stone.[36] The speaker and his beloved, the "bride and bridegroom," unite, die, and weep together in their grave/marriage bed/prison in order to give birth to the philosophical child. The alchemical vessel of the limbeck during the "flood" that results from the chemical lovers' tears is symbolized by Noah's vessel, the ark, "which rides on the flood and becomes a vessel of regeneration, of new life."[37] In the "Nocturnall," however, there is no

[32] *Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd ed., s.v. "Sap."

[33] Donne, "A Sermon of Valediction at my going into Germany, at Lincolns-Inne," in *The Sermons of John Donne*, ed. George R. Potter and Evelyn Simpson, 10 vols. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1953–1962), 2:247.

[34] Genesis 1:2–4 (King James Version).

[35] *A Dictionary of Alchemical Imagery*, s.v. "Tears."

[36] *A Dictionary of Alchemical Imagery*, s.v. "Flood."

[37] *A Dictionary of Alchemical Imagery*, s.v. "Flood."

regenerative end; there is only death, leaving the bride and bridegroom "carcasses": "often absences / Withdrew our soules, and made us carcasses" (26–27). Clarence H. Miller has described the references in the "Nocturnall" to weeping and the flood as a "reversal of Genesis," where the speaker echoes the Biblical allusions to the flood that led to the birth of the world to show not what was created, but what was destroyed, a process which parallels that of a childbirth which yielded only the death of the mother and child.[38] The strangely inverted creation/Creation images would be particularly appropriate to an occasion when childbirth has resulted in the loss of the beloved. As Helen Gardner has noted, the references to "weeping" recall the valedictions Donne wrote to his wife, and thus seem to suggest more evidence that the woman being mourned is Anne More.[39]

It is significant that the womb, tears, ark, and flood story are connected both in alchemy and in this poem, where the reverse Creation of the world parallels the reverse process of human creation, an inverted and ironic *dar la luz*. These images of the beloved's womb have more than just alchemical and Creation resonances, however; they also connote the womb of the Virgin Mary. In alchemy, the elements of the first Creation "were looked upon as the virgin mother of all things," and the alchemical female element, argent vive (also the speaker's "bride" in the "Nocturnall"), was symbolized by the virgin, or Virgin who gave the Light of the World, Christ, to the world.[40] If Anne is the speaker's "bride" in the "Nocturnall," under an inverted *dar la luz*, Donne would be linking his wife with the Virgin Mary.

Indeed, Donne describes his wife in terms of the Virgin Mary elsewhere, specifically in her epitaph, which calls Anne "'*Matri piissimae*,' an application of the epithet of the Blessed Virgin/Mother," and, as "Donne's best reader *and* text (*lector*) . . . the first view of her as a type of Mary in its recollection of her as the most *select*, the *chosen*, the *delight of the gods*."[41] Just as the figures of Anne and Mary are collapsed in Donne's epitaph for his wife, so in the "Nocturnall" the Virgin Mary, who

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[38]Miller, "Donne's 'A Nocturnall upon S. Lucies Day' and the Nocturns of Matins," *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900* 6.1 (1966): 86.

[39]Gardner, pp. 181–201.

[40]*A Dictionary of Alchemical Imagery*, s.v. "Virgin."

[41]Hester, p. 23.

brought the Light of the World, Christ, into the world conflates with the beloved who has died *dando la luz*. The note of despondency sounded by the speaker as he conflates the beloved with the Virgin Mary suggests that the woman being mourned in the poem, the beloved who "gave the Light," and thus the world, everlasting life, but yielded everlasting death for Donne, is Anne More.

The implicit identification of the dead beloved with Anne suggested by the images comparing her to Mary is also reinforced by the form of the "Nocturnall," whose arithmetical structure itself relates to *dar la luz*. As Frost has shown, the "stanza form and line total . . . indicate that the arithmetical structure of the poem . . . [is] dominated by the numbers five and nine." Five "as a marriage number" and a "number of androgyny" was also "considered as a number of procreation and generation."[42] The arithmetical structure of the poem recalls "marriage" and "procreation," but the number five was also the number associated with the Virgin Mary.[43]

Anne and the Virgin Mary conflate calendrically under St. Lucy in the "Nocturnall," for, as Miller notes, "the feast of St. Lucy's (December 13) occurs in Advent within the octave of a major feast of the Blessed Virgin (Immaculate Conception, Dec. 8) which is commemorated in St. Lucy's office."[44] The date of Anne More's death coincided with the shared feast day, Anne having died on the Feast of the Assumption of the Virgin.[45] In addition to these calendrical crossovers, the time of year in which the feast of St. Lucy's Day is celebrated relates Anne, the Virgin, and St. Lucy herself by recapitulating the process of *dando la luz*: just as childbirth is the time when a child moves out of the darkness of the womb into the light, so too the Feast of St. Lucy's Day is the time when, at the winter solstice in the Julian calendar, the sun moves from its lowest point in the sky (darkness) into a higher sphere that yields a daily augmentation of light. The speaker expresses this seasonal and celestial change by describing the "scarce seaven houres" Lucy "unmaskes" herself, and the correspondingly low emission of sunlight: "The Sunne is spent, and now his flasks / Send forth light squibs, no constant rayes" (2–4). As

[42]Frost, p. 162.
[43]Miller, p. 80.
[44]Miller, p. 80.
[45]Shawcross, p. 56.

Frost notes, these celestial and seasonal fluctuations associated the Feast of St. Lucy's Day with the Incarnation, where "the movement of the sun from its lowest position in the heavens, accompanied with the daily increase of light, paralleled the coming of Christ into the darkness of the fallen world."[46] Under the trope of *dar la luz*, light, religion, the Virgin Mary, childbirth, and Anne More coalesce. It must not be forgotten, however, in dealing with the shared calendrical dates and seasons during Donne's time, that due to the calendrical shifts between the Julian and Gregorian calendars, on the Continent St. Lucy's day no longer coincided with the time of the solstice. Anne Lake Prescott writes of the calendrical shift as having particular significance for the "Nocturnall": "Donne's paradoxical negatives are even more poignant if one remembers that across the Channel, if only for one year, she [Lucy] had become—nothing."[47]

The speaker departs from concerns of "nothingnesse" in the final lines of the poem to make ready his soul for reunion with his other half in "the next world, that is, at the next Spring" (11): "Let mee prepare towards her, and let mee call / This houre her Vigill, and her Eve" (43–44). "Her Vigill" literally denotes the vigil on St. Lucy's Eve, "the watch kept on the eve of a festival or holy day; a nocturnal service or devotional exercise," and, because it occurs within the Virgin's ferial cycle, also the Virgin Mary's vigil.[48] "Her Vigill," then, would refer to Anne's nocturnal (and "Nocturnall"), for, if Walton's reportage is to be believed, after Anne More died, the poet spent the remainder of the night of her death on his knees in prayer, and in the morning "gave a voluntary assurance [to his children] . . . never to bring them under the subjection of a Step-mother, which promise he kept most faithfully, burying with his teares all earthly joyes in his most dear and deserving wives grave, and betake himself to a most retired and solitary life."[49] Indeed, as Rodney Stenning Edgecombe notes, "'Let me prepare towards her' . . . also seems to allude to an anonymous Latin poem, the *Pervigilium Veneris*, by recalling the wakeful anticipation of love (*cras amet qui nunquam amavit*). But instead

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[46]Frost, p. 154.

[47]Prescott, "Refusing Translation: The Gregorian Calendar and Early Modern English Writers," *Yearbook of English Studies* 36.1 (2006): 8.

[48]*Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd ed., s.v. "Vigil," n[1] b.

[49]Walton, p. 52.

of the vigil of a sleepless groom, he substitutes the vigil, or wake, of a widower."[50] The speaker of the "Nocturnall" is both groom and widower in the vigil figured in the "Nocturnall"—he is the "bridegroom" lamenting the loss of his "bride," the faithful keeping devotional watch, and the widower despairing over the death of his beloved wife.

Donne's wordplay on *dar la luz* highlights the speaker's despondency as it conveys the speaker's anxiety that his behavior and feelings may be uxorious. The association of the Virgin Mary with the speaker's beloved through alchemical, arithmetical, and calendrical conflations, and the elevation of Anne's death by identifying it with the death of the world, is an almost idolatrous undertaking, especially for a member of the clergy, as Donne was in 1617. The speaker of the poem even raises the beloved higher than the celestial sun: he calls the beloved "my Sunne" and the celestial sun the "lesser Sunne" (37–38). As Donne puns in his "Goodfriday, 1613. Riding Westward," Christ was seen as the "Sunne" of God; this kind of elevation of a mortal to a divine position verges on blasphemy because it mischannels the devotional energies that ought to be directed toward God and expends them on a secular woman.[51] In Donne's sermon preached at Sir Francis Nethersole's marriage, he cautions his audience against such uxorious behavior: "There is not a more uncomely, a poorer thing, then to love a Wife like a Mistresse."[52] "A Hymne to God the Father," too, features the fear of uxoriousness; Donne puns on his "sinne" that he fears God will not forgive, for "When thou hast done, thou hast not done, / For I have more" (11–12). While there is a certain yearning and emptiness in "A Hymne to God the Father" as Donne plays with the idea of God not having "done" or "Donne," because he still has "more," or "More," the added guilt of loving the subject of the "Nocturnall," his wife, too much (at the expense of diverting devotional energies away from God) intensifies the overall tone of despondency that permeates the poem. In the same way that *dar la luz* illuminated the reversal of light, alchemy, birth, creation, and Creation, it also illuminates the poem's reversal of rightful devotional

[50]Edgecombe, "Donne's 'A Nocturnal upon S. Lucy's Day, Being the Shortest Day,'" *Explicator* 52.3 (1994): 144.

[51]Guibbory, pp. 204, 208.

[52]Donne, "Sermon Number 17, Preached at Sir Francis Nethersole's Marriage," in *The Sermons of John Donne*, 2:345.

energy. The word in Spanish for "light" ("*luz*") has religious connotations of its own; it refers to a state of knowing and being spiritually connected with God: "*Luz. Religioso. Estado o situacion de conocimiento y cercania de Dios* [Light. Religious. State of knowing and becoming close to God]."[53] By loving the light of his life too much (Anne, his "Sunne"), he diverts his devotional energies away from entering into the blessed state of becoming close to God ("*Luz,*" the true light).

The poem concludes with a line that could very well be the first—"this / Both the yeares, and the dayes deep midnight is" (44–45)—completing the circle of despair that is the "Nocturnall." Or is it? The poem moves from "Tis the yeares midnight, and it is the dayes" (1), to "The Sunne is spent" (3), to a discussion of "nothingnesse" (15), back to an image of the sun being spent ("nor will my Sunne renew" [37]), until finally returning to "this / Both the yeares, and the dayes deep midnight is" (44–45). The circular shape of the poem suggests the alchemical meanings of the circle with a dot in the center, which "symbolizes, at the macrocosmic level, the Creator, and at the microcosmic level, gold," the sought creation in alchemy, which, significantly, was also symbolized by the sun.[54] The poem's shape at once recalls the tension over uxoriousness (Donne's "Sunne," Anne, as Creator), and the desired birth (in alchemy, gold, and in childbirth, a child) as enabled by the "generative powers" of the sun, whose warmth was thought to "ripen such imperfect metals as iron, copper and lead into the perfect metal, gold."[55] Donne's "Sunne is spent," however; Anne will no longer bring children out of the darkness of the womb into the light as she died giving birth. The circularity of the poem also suggests the cycle of life and death—from the death in the womb, to birth, to death yet again; or from dissolution to putrefaction and death, to rebirth in the Stone in alchemy; or from death in this world to rebirth in the next.

Donne conveys the ironic notion of the womb as the place of birth and death in his final sermon, "Death's Duell." In a passage that is particularly close to the "Nocturnall" as it draws on his experience of how childbirth too often results in death, Donne declares: "Our very *birth* and

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[53] *Diccionario del Espanol Actual*, ed. Manuel Seco, Olimpia Andres, and Gabino Ramos (Madrid: Aguilar, 1999), s.v. "*Luz.*"

[54] *A Dictionary of Alchemical Imagery*, s.v. "Circle," and "Sun."

[55] *A Dictionary of Alchemical Imagery*, s.v. "Sun."

entrance into this life is *exitus à morte*, an *issue from death*, for in our mother's *wombe* wee are *dead* . . . neither is there any *grave* so close, or so *putrid* a *prison*, as the *wombe* would be unto us, if we stayed in it *beyond* our time, or dyed there *before* our time."[56] The "*putrid* . . . *prison*" of the womb recalls Covarrubias's image of the womb as a "dark dungeon devoid of light" in his definition of *dar la luz*, but also vividly describes stillbirth. Donne's final sermon, which describes the simultaneity of life and death, and the place of the womb where both can occur, captures the crux of life's cycle, which he had so grimly analyzed in his earlier "Nocturnall."

Although "Death's Duell" was preached in public at the beginning of Lent, according to Walton, those present believed that Donne was preaching about himself:

> Yet after some faint pauses in his zealous prayer, his strong desires enabled his weak body to discharge his memory of his preconceived meditations; which were of dying. . . . Many that then saw his teares, and heard his hollow voice, professing they thought the Text prophetically chosen, and that Dr. Donne *had preached his own funeral Sermon.*[57]

In that private meditation delivered in a public place, Donne would return to the circularity of life and death in terms of the circular womb:

> And as prisoners discharg'd of actions may lye for fees; so when the *wombe* hath discharg'd us, yet we are bound to it by *cordes* of flesh, by such a *string*, as that wee cannot goe thence, nor stay there. We celebrate our owne funeralls with cryes, even at our birth; as though our *threescore and ten years of life* were spent in our mothers labour, and our circle made up in the first point thereof. We begge one Baptism with another, a sacrament of tears; And we come into a world that lasts many ages, but wee last not.[58]

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[56]Donne, "Death's Duell, or, A Consolation to the Soule, against the dying Life, and living Death of the Body," in *The Sermons of John Donne*, 10:231–232.

[57]Walton, p. 104.

[58]Donne, "Death's Duell," 10:233.

As Donne delivered his "own funeral sermon," delivered, as many thought, not "to preach mortification by a living voice, but mortality by a decaying body and dying face,"[59] Donne may well have had an image of Anne in his mind, a woman who brought a child from the darkness of the womb out into the light only to result in the death of herself and her child. The child's cries (if there were any in those "few minutes" of life) would have been its funeral cries, and the circle of the child's life already "made up in the first point thereof." This awareness that life, light, darkness, and death are intertwined in the human experience is what makes Donne's "A nocturnall upon *S. Lucies* day" such an urgent poem.

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[59]Walton, p. 104.