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Signing at Cross Purpose: Resignation in Donne's "Holy Sonnet I"

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In her 1952 edition of *The Divine Poems* of John Donne, Helen Gardner proposes that the twelve *Holy Sonnets* printed in 1633 were designed as a coherent sequence punctuated by a thematic shift at its midpoint. The first six poems of the group focus on death and judgment, the second six on love. "The progress," Gardner finds, "is clear: We love [God] because he first loved us."[1] But the progression of the *Holy Sonnets* sequence—or that there is such a sequence—has not been all that clear to others. Indeed, the argument for reading these poems consecutively has been the matter of some dispute primarily because the claim has seemed to depend on inconclusive external evidence. It is likely, moreover, that re-examination of the external evidence concerning Donne's texts and their transmission occasioned by the forthcoming Variorum volume of *The Divine Poems* may not resolve but further stimulate this debate.

Given such a impasse, it may be helpful to employ internal evidence to test conclusions based largely on discursive reading. Internal indications of order in the *Holy Sonnets* have been considered by others, but only sporadically and impressionistically, as has the structure of individual sonnets within the proposed sequence. In this essay, we examine several internal theological and poetic features of "Holy Sonnet I. As Due By Many Titles" that suggest this poem was likely intended to serve as the first in the *Holy Sonnets* sequence, the very position assigned to it by Gardner. In our discussion we remain mindful of the temptation to present Donne's religious verse as theological exposition rather than as the result of a master poet's "sensitivity to the

theological tensions of the era" often daringly crafted and always marked by his characteristic wit.[2]

"As Due By Many Titles" is a Petrarchan sonnet, albeit a modified one that violates generic convention. In it, for example, the narrator's role has shifted from lover to beloved, and the rhetorical expression of love—the desire to exchange vows, the pursuit of Grace—is awarded a new prominence. Such altered Petrarchanism draws attention to cruxes of language and form in Donne's sonnet, cruxes that (as we will observe later) have not gone unnoticed by critics, who generally have concluded that the narrator's end is despair, sinning against hope as he rejects the possibility of divine mercy.

Changes perceived in the sonnet, however, should be carefully scrutinized specifically in relation to its octave, which does not emphasize such hopelessness. In the first eight lines the narrator speaks of being created by God the Father and rescued by His Son: "first I was made / By Thee, and for thee" and then "when I was decay'd / Thy blood bought" me. This all-enclosing, Spirit-manifesting history of human existence—the wondrous cycle of creation and re-creation—informs the narrator's recognition of his former Adamic and his potential Christic share ("I am thy sonne") in this divine revelation. It is, in fact, a Trinitarian revelation that involves the Father by whom the narrator was made, the Son by whom he is potentially saved, and the Holy Spirit by whom such divine actions are abidingly communicated. There is little indication here of any forthcoming self-doubt or despair.

The narrator next sees himself in even more distinctly Trinitarian terms as he sequentially and traditionally images himself (in his ideal state) as "servant," "sheepe," and "temple." He once was, and potentially may again be, a servant of the Father (who creates all life), a sheep of the Son (who oversees the Father's flock), and a temple of the Holy Spirit (who instrumentally dwells within the soul and body of each redeemed person). The restoration of the narrator's Trinitarian roles would also necessarily mean the restoration of his divine "Image," the interior trinity of reason, will, and affections known collectively as the *Imago Dei* imprinted on the soul.

Donne and his contemporaries inherited this appreciation of the Trinitarian design and destiny of humanity. In terms of Christian identity, this legacy specifically included a Trinitarian interpretation of the sacrament of Baptism, proclaimed by a stellar list of the Fathers—Tertullian, Justin Martyr, Ambrose, Cyprian, Jerome, Origen, Athanasius, Augustine, among others—as well as by the majority of the heretics. In the *Rituale Romanum*, which for centuries has defined Roman Catholic liturgy, the second stage of the baptismal ceremony includes frequent invocations of the triune God (and not only during the child's three immersions).[3] Sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Anglican practice closely tracked the Roman rite.

At the heart of the Tinitarian interpretation of Baptism is Jesus' instruction to his disciples: "Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost" (Matt. 28:17).[4] This scriptural source obligated the explicit mention of each person of the Trinity, sequentially enumerated during the baptismal ceremony precisely in the order set by Jesus's words. The iteration of the triune names of God was so commonly associated with the efficacy of the sacrament that most Christian sects recognized as valid any such christening regardless of who performed the service. Hence, undergoing a second baptism was a rare occurrence in Donne's milieu.

For the new Christian, this traditional interpretation designated Baptism as the entry point of one's redemptive journey. Both this designation and the traditional association of the baptismal rite with theTrinity inform the emphasis on sacramentality in the theologically nuanced octave of "As Due By Many Titles." The octave recognizes Baptism as the first, the gateway sacrament in the progression of Christian redemption. Alexander Nowell's 1570 Catechism, which was the official codification of the tenets of the Church of England until the Presbyterian Assembly catechism of 1648, describes Baptism as the "entrie by which we are received into the Church."[5] This Anglican perspective has solid medieval roots: it echoes the famous Decree for the Armenians in the Bull *Exultate Deo* of Pope Eugene IV (1439)

which awards Baptism first place among the sacraments, because, as the door to the spiritual life, it incorporates the individual as a member of Christ with the Church. For Roman Catholics and Anglicans alike, Baptism inaugurates and enables a redeemed soul's new life, founded on its reconnection to God. It is, Nowell's catechism instructs, "the begynnyng of regeneration" whereby "we are joyned and grafted into the body of Christ."[6]

The recipient of Baptism, no longer subject to the dire consequences of Original Sin and graced by an indelible identity, now is wondrously open to the regenerative process, the possibility of eternal salvation. Likewise, Donne's poem exhibits the baptismal pattern of an affirmation of Christ and a renunciation of the devil. The narrator, however, is despondent because his improper expectations threaten his informal effort to renew his baptismal vows. Moreover, as we will also observe apropos arguments for positioning this poem at the head of the *Holy Sonnets*, its references to the Trinity and Baptism include allusions to inaugural ritual signing.

If the octave of "As Due by Many Titles" is richly nuanced concerning Christian regeneration, its first lines delineate the terms of that experience. These terms, considered both in the singularity of their meaning and in their intertextuality, raise issues pertaining to the Covenant of Grace and its enablement of self-affirmation in a language at once civilly legal and scripturally typological. From the outset—the opening lines read, "As due by many titles I resigne / My selfe to thee"—Donne's sonnet raises the subject of debt and ownership, traditional terms for Christian redemption. The speaker is miserable, Robert V. Young pertinently observes, because he sees "his situation as that of an unreliable debtor who tries to cancel his debts by inviting God to foreclose on his hopelessly over-mortgaged self."[7] And in an additional legal/monetary context, "due" also refers to the legal fee, so to speak, owed to the Son by fallen humanity in payment for Christ's redemptive advocacy and sacrifice. The wordplay in these lines is exceptionally fruitful considered in the light of the remainder of the octave, which includes such specifically covenental terms as "bought," "repaid,"

"usurpe," "steale," and "except," and, as well, such terms related to property and service as "selfe," "decay'd," "temple," and "worke."

Less evident, but by no means merely latent, is a pun on "dew," which ratifies the sacramental purport of these lines. Elsewhere Donne uses this word to refer to "the sacred moisture of sacramental grace," especially in relation to the baptismal ritual.[8] Here this sacramental dew is associated with "many titles," which alludes to the eminent names of the three Persons of God and, as well, to their Trinitarian claim on—their title-deed to—every property within creation, including the narrator. The reference to "titles" may also allude to the inscription on the Cross, one of the earliest meanings of *titulus* (*OED, title*: 1.a.). Baptismal dew, in other words, is made sacramental by the many titles (names and claims) of the three Persons of God, who collectively account for the efficacy of the sacrament in inaugurating the potential restoration of the soul's Trinitarian *Imago Dei*.

Given this reality, it is no wonder that the narrator resigns himself, in the sense of passively surrendering to a prior legally binding condition beyond his control. But the word "resigne"—which M. Thomas Hester considers the "most provocative pun in the poem"[9]—can refer also to a deliberate renunciation, an act of will possibly so forceful that it paradoxically amounts to an affirmation. The speaker, who desires to reclaim what has been lost through the Fall, wishes that his personal act of will would amount to such an affirmation. When he resigns in the sense of renunciation, he also re-*signs*—re-affirms—in the sense of renewing a covenant or a contract with a signature, mark, or stamp (OED: *sign*, 4. a.).

This very dualism—disavowal and avowal—also characterizes the liturgical understanding of Baptism. Through the sacramental sign and seal of Baptism the recipient (or his representative) actively repudiates his previous condition and avers a new life in Christ. In both Roman and Anglican baptismal ritual (in Thomas Cranmer's influential 1552 Anglican rite, for example), there is a ceremonial stage that specifically features the renunciation of Satan followed by the affirmation of Christian creed. This sacramental appreciation of renewed covenant and divine re-possession—in Donne's own words, the "*imprinting of*

the Seal of the living God in the forehead of the Elect" (5: 98)—extends the legal implications of the opening lines of "As Due by Many Titles."[10]

But the word "resigne" in this sonnet likely alludes to another feature common to both Roman Catholic and Anglican baptismal practice: marking with the sign of the cross, which the poet associates with the sealing of a document. Despite the Reformation and the growing anti-sacramental climate within the seventeenth-century Church of England, the practice of signing was not obliterated in either its baptismal rites or its rituals responding to demonic possession. In the middle of the sixteenth century, the sign of the cross was still a feature of the Anglican Sunday church service.[11] Later, when the content of the Book of Common Prayer was being debated, the issue of signing the cross emerged as a site of major contention. Its retention was variously defended or disputed by Anglican partisans. Eventually, German-born Martin Bucer, a critic of the first edition of the Prayer Book who was appointed Regius Professor of Divinity at Cambridge in 1549, prevailed against John Hooper's objections to the retention of the practice during the baptismal rite. Subsequently the baptismal gesture of the little cross signed with the thumb upon the forehead was included in the final 1552 version of the Prayer Book. Nevertheless, the controversy continued, further fueled by Puritan dissenters who seethed over the minimal act of baptismal forehead signing as symptomatic of Roman Catholic idolatry and as evidence of insufficient reform within the Church of England. When the Nonconformists banned the Book of Common Prayer during the 1640s and 1650s, the practice of baptismal signing was performed secretly in Anglican homes.

Since the earliest times of the Christian church, the implications of signing, with its overt association with the Trinity, have paralleled the implications of sealing in Baptism. In early practice, three fingers, or rather the thumb and two fingers, were displayed with the ring finger and little finger folded back upon the palm. These two fingers symbolized the dual nature of Christ as divine and human, whereas the extended three fingers denoted the three Persons of the Trinity. The

retention of ritual signing in Anglican liturgy acknowledges the significant affinity between the Trinity and its sacrament, Baptism. Both entail at once a candidate's passive submission and active affirmation, a disavowal and an avowal—the same dual sense informing the word "resigne" in Donne's sonnet. Signing, that is to say, is simultaneously an invocation of divine blessing (a recognition of dependence upon God) and a confession of faith (a renunciation of sin and, conversely, an acknowledgment of sealed Christian identity). And just as Baptism is the gateway sacrament preluding Christian life, the sign of the cross is the gateway invocation preluding Christian prayer. The Church of England, it is true, eventually demoted signing from its traditional position at the beginning of prayer, but its retention of the practice during the administration of Baptism implicitly conserved the traditional understanding of the sign of the cross as an inaugural invocation.

Where did Donne, priest and poet, stand in the controversy over signing? As Theresa DiPasquale points out, "Attempts to classify Donne simply as an 'Anglican' or a 'Puritan' distort the complexities of the late sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century English Church[,] and oversimplify Donne's constantly evolving sense of his place within it. . . . Donne can, for example, defend conservative ceremonial—including the sign of the cross in Baptism, kneeling at Holy Communion, and the use of the wedding ring—while departing broadly from Hooker and his successors on the role of sermons—insisting, as did 'Puritans' like Cartwright and Perkins, that preaching is no less essential than the sacraments."[12] She concludes that "Donne does not so much tread the 'fine line' of the via media as forge a synthesis that is distinctly his own."[13] Regarding the particular focus of our discussion, it is noteworthy that DiPasquale finds Donne's poetic imagination to be especially stimulated by the sacrament of Baptism, including the ceremonial retention of the controversial practice of making the sign of the cross. Donne, she concludes, "defended the practice throughout his career in the pulpit."[14]

At one point in an undated sermon preached at a christening, Donne proclaims: "There is . . . the *crosse of Christ Jesus*, and his Merits, in

[the] water of baptisme" (5:108). In a 1624 sermon preached before the Earl of Exeter, Donne uses the word "seale" to refer to the sign of the cross as it is traced on the new Christian's forehead during the Anglican practice of baptism:

> These two seales then hath God set upon us all, his *Image* in our soules, at our *making*, his *Image*, that is his *Sonne*, upon our bodies and soules, in his *incarnation*. . . . He sets another seale upon us. . . in the Sacrament of *Baptisme*, when the seale of his *Crosse*, is a testimony, not that Christ was *borne*, (as the former seale was) but that also he *dyed* for us; there we receive that seale upon the *forehead*, that we should conforme our selves to him who is so sealed to us (6:160).

Sin marred the *Imago Dei*—the little trinity of reason, will, and affections comprising the original "seale" of God upon Adam—but the image was renewed in Christ as the Second Adam. Baptism extends to Christians the opportunity likewise to enjoy its restoration within themselves. In both Roman and Anglican traditions, the sign of the cross made during the baptismal rite is a visible sacramental indication of the Christian's new life through Christ's restoration of mankind's Trinitarian heritage.

It is likely as well that Donne's focus on Baptism in this poem includes an awareness of rituals for adult baptism and the need for personal renewal of baptismal vows (not to be confused with re-baptism). Donne may have been familiar with such rites from his examination of Catholic doctrine, which included the work of the thirteenth-century liturgist William Durandus. In one rite described by Durandus, the catechumen first waits outside the church door, then on entry renounces all his former errors, and only then signs the cross on the brow, ears, eyes, nostrils, mouth, breast, and between the shoulders. Afterwards, the candidate bends his knee in submission and a cross is signed on his forehead, first by the godfather and then by the priest.[15] The emphasis on repudiation of error is obvious. The signing itself, considered from early times a "sacramental" of great potency—Augus-

tine lists it with Baptism and the Eucharist as among the chief means by which the faithful "have Christ"[16]—is performed by tracing two lines intersecting at right angles either on the head and torso or on the forehead, symbolically indicating the figure of Christ's cross.

Even more certain than Donne's possible familiarity with rituals for adult baptism is his awareness of the requirement to renew baptismal vows, which, we maintain, impinges on a liturgical reading of "As Due by Many Titles." Members of the Church of England who were baptized as infants were expected to make such an informal renewal. As Alexander Nowell pertinently indicates in his influential Anglican catechism, "When they [people baptized as infants] are growen to yeares, they must nedes them selves acknowledge the truth of their baptisme."[17] One reason for such a renewal, Donne himself explains, is that Christians inevitably "[fall]... from those graces... received in *Baptisme*." (5:103) Not re-baptism, but a re-confirmation of vows is required. The Church of England of Donne's time may have lacked a formal sacramental occasion like the Roman Catholic rite of Confirmation to celebrate such a renewal (and extension) of baptismal identity, but as Nowell's phrase "must nedes" indicates, Anglican theology nonetheless strongly stipulated the necessity of an informal re-signing or re-affirmation of the covenant. Such a renewal of baptismal vows was not a one-time personal undertaking any more than was making the inaugural gesture of the sign of the cross; it was an occasional practice conducted meditatively at various moments of personal significance.

"As Due by Many Titles" is an instance of such baptismal renewal, re-signing, and re-sealing. It celebrates Baptism as the sacrament of the Trinity and, like "The Crosse," promotes the Anglican baptismal practice of forehead signing. To "resign," then, refers simultaneously to the narrator's submission to and re-affirmation of the work of the Trinity both in the redemptive history of the world at large (creation and re-creation) and in the Baptismal sealing of the individual soul (the re-imprinted *Imago Dei*). This double response to the Trinity, as the wellspring of all life, is particularly associated in the poem with Baptism (the beginning of Christian life) and the sign of the cross (the beginning

of Christian prayer). In light of this multi-layered emphasis on regeneration and covenantal "sealing," the octave of "As Due by Many Titles" suggests that the poem inaugurates a *Holy Sonnets* sequence.

The sestet of this sonnet is another, albeit a related and consequent story. The narrator laments, "Oh I shall soone despaire," and this dejection signals an inversion in the sestet of the sacramental hope expressed in the octave, a tension which may be attributed to their discursive and structural bifurcation. A number of critics have observed a change in the speaker's tone and attitude, and their responses point to a major crux in interpretation of the poem. An overview of this critical opinion is pertinent here, beginning with that which addresses discursive thematic concerns.

Early on, the apparent conflict of the sonnet's halves drew critical attention: the octave was seen as less concrete, less dramatic in tone than the sestet, which was perceived as more concrete and personalized, the address of an individual soul to a dubiously merciful God.[18] More recently the sestet has proved troubling to New Historians like Richard Strier, who targets its "petulance . . . without humor or self-directed irony"; Strier pronounces it a failure because "instead of a prayer for unmerited mercy, [the speaker] produces something like a threat."[19] Even more theologically oriented scholars see the sonnet's conclusion as suspect. Indeed, for Young this is the poem's fundamental theme: the sinner, mistrusting divine intervention waits at the brink of despair for some indication that God will "chuse" him, while Hester sees the sinner's desperation as "an ingenious but willfully abusive reversal of the imagery and argument of the octave," with "the creative Father replaced by the devil" in a kind of Manichaean psychomachia. Hence, rejecting God's mercy in an act of narcissistic self-abnegation, the narrator ends in a hell of his own making.[20]

Another, more slender, body of opinion deals with this problem in terms of structure, primarily with the poem's linguistic bifurcation. The theological implications of this bifurcation mandate a parallel to Adam's Fall. In this perspective, the purity of the speaker's relationship with his Creator decays, descending from the personalized covenant language

of "I and Thou" to a narcissistic focus on the speaker in his fallen world.[21] But the shift concerns not just the theological "I" but also the "I" of craft, for the confluence of theological and linguistic decay urges the reader to consider both fallen man and fallen poet. After all, Renaissance homiletics and poetics were deeply concerned with testing man's linguistic abilities to re-create himself in God's image. When Hester questions "the capacity of 'titles' to 're-sign' the self in humble resignation to the handwriting of God,"[22] it is a question to be asked on the levels of discourse and of design.

The proliferation of metaphors in the octave reflects relationships with God in a manner that, for Young, indicates "the speaker's uncertainty and the feebleness of his position," and the sestet "dwells queasily on the prospect that the proffered self may not be worth the cost of refurbishing, that only the devil is still interested."[23] In fact, aptly foreshadowing the desperate situation described in the sestet, Donne embeds potentially negative language within the sacramental celebration of the octave—"decay'd," "paines," "betray'd My selfe"—and, Hester observes, this language contributes to "the changing shape of . . . language in the octave [that] subtly traces man's fall . . . into the enigmatic text of the self." The speaker may be made "with thy selfe to shine . . . but that does not mean that he does."[24]

"As Due by Many Titles" is, in a very real sense, a poem about craft and the failure of self-fashioning (a term of much and facile currency nowadays). The octave of the poem, as we have demonstrated, presents an appreciation of God-created and God-repaired selves that is maintained until its pentultimate line (the sonnet's center) where this appreciation rapidly disintegrates.

It has been pointed out that after the conventional, harmonious metrics and rhyme (abba, abba) of the octave, the poem begins to lose its integrity and move toward a narcissism that obviates hope. The subsequent rhymes (cddccc) of the sestet feature a total immersion in "mee"/"I doe see"/"me"/"mee."[25] Is this poem, as has been suggested, "struggling to become an English instead of a Petrarchan sonnet," an attempt thwarted by the sentence structure in the sestet, which seems to divide that into two tercets?[26] The question arises when the sonnet is

examined in the light of its syntactic construction. In this light, the prescribed structure of the Petrarchan sonnet is obviated by line 11 with its subordinate clauses running on into lines 12 and 13. The discursive sequence is also interrupted by the piteous "Oh" of line 12.

Resisting this reading is the possibility that line 13 is not necessarily the first clause of a compound sentence. Rather, line 13 is apparently completed with a full stop, which might more accurately convey the despairing character of the last lines—that it is in effect an "attempt by the speaker to place guilt outside himself, another afterthought."[27] In his edition, Grierson opted for the compound sentence, perhaps in deference to the demands of grammar and the Petrarchan sonnet form, but if Donne here bends sonnet conventions to his own purpose, the full stop is worth consideration. The problem is one engendered by a primarily discursive reading, which can lead everywhere and nowhere (and which has underwritten the paper industry for years, as Variorum commentary editors will attest).

Additional structural limina, specifically metrical patterns, shed light on this debate. Scanning the sestet is not easy: lines 9 and 10 begin with inverted feet, line 12 with a spondee, and the last two lines each contain a hypermetric eleven syllables. The scansion of these last two lines has occasioned some argument. In her 1952 edition of *The Divine Poems*, Gardner accepts the 1633 contraction "wilt'not" (admittedly without manuscript support) in order to create a decasyllabic line. Gardner's choice results in a masculine rhyme that is coupled with the second syllable of a feminine rhyme, even though, as Hester points out, it is "haunted by the true feminine rhyme 'chuse me' and 'lose mee.'"[28]

The hypermetric feature of this conclusion apparently reinforces the effect of the sestet's despair. But for the reader schooled in structural practices of the period, the effect reinforces the sestet's meaning; for in a witty conclusion Donne, ever the craftsman, has literally objectified the speaker's despair. "I shall soone despaire," the narrator threatens in line 12, and then apparently makes good his threat in the dis-pairing of his final couplet: two eleven-syllable lines. This numerical wittiness is indicative of an arithmetical patterning that, like the poem's narrative

performance, moves from the harmony of the octave to the disarray of the sestet.

Patrick O'Connell, commenting on the possibility that the *Holy Sonnets* form a sequence, draws attention to Donne's probable use of number symbolism in determining the structure of the series. Specifically, O'Connell points to Donne's reference to the number twelve in a sermon on Apoc. 7:9, citing Augustine's identification of that number as representative of the fullness of salvation: "where so ever [Augustine] finds that number of *twelve* (as the *twelve thrones*, where the *Saints shall judge the world*, and divers such) we may take that number of *twelve*, and *twelve, pro universitate salvandorum*, that that number signifies, all those who shall be saved" (6:161).[29] Interestingly, the seventh chapter of the Book of the Apocalypse refers not only to servants, but also to the shining sun (v. 16), the Lamb (v. 9, 10, 14, 17), and the temple (v. 15)—images related to the Father's creation of servants, the Son's pastoral care of the servant flock, and the Spirit's dwelling in the temple of the Christian as represented in "As Due by Many Titles." In another sermon, Donne similarly indicates that Baptism brings us into God's kingdom as "his *subjects*" now in "his *service*"(5:107). Here Donne's sermon refers specifically to the sealing of the servants of God "in their foreheads," their number, as given in the following verse, "an hundred and forty and four thousand" (Apoc. 7:3-4). It is no coincidence that the total syllable count of "Holy Sonnet I" is one hundred forty four, and that a consideration of this number (the number of the saved—twelve—multiplied by itself) bears on the poem's structure and meaning.

Investigation of the arithmetical structure in "As Due by Many Titles" reveals a pattern which reinforces the bifurcation experienced in a discursive reading of the sonnet. The decasyllabic lines of the octave draw no arithmetical attention to themselves until the poem's halfway point. The placement of Christ at the structural center is a commonplace in Renaissance devotional poetry, and scrutiny of lines 7 and 8 reveal witplay with this commonplace that echoes their literal meaning. Both enumerate the Christic images reaffirmed by Baptism for the narrator,

but the center is fractured by the break in line 7—as a matter of fact a break initiated in the exact center of the line—which refers to the betrayal of Christ and the desecration of the temple of the Spirit. Moreover the line is extrasyllabic by one syllable—a common numerical device for signifying transgression against the Law. But line 8 also is extrasyllabic, a full twelve syllables. Hence, at the center of the poem and at the brink of the sestet, where he is tempted to despair, the narrator is subtly called back to hope by twelve, "that number [which] signifies all who shall be saved."

But of course, the outcome is neither easy nor certain, and this difficulty is also underwritten by the sonnet's arithmology. Common parlance has generally divided the sestet into two tercets. A reading which takes into consideration the fragmentation engendered by the parallel questions asked in lines 9 and 10, with their direct focus on the Temptor, can also entertain the possibility of a vacillation between the "Thou" and "I" of lines 11 and 12, and also of the indeterminacy of the eleven-syllable hypermetric couplet. Anthony Bellette may have such a reading in mind when he observes that "the two final lines are themselves broken into two opposed halves. The second half of the poem consists of essentially isolated moments at war with themselves. . . . The familiar sonnet structure, in which opposed elements in the beginning are resolved at the end, is here completely reversed."[30] One is left with the sense of incompleteness familiar to readers of the period's divine poetry: the sense of an ending is delayed, is denied until the passing of judgment.

What erupts in the sestet, what distorts it both narratively and structurally, is doubt. Even as the narrator of the sonnet re-affirms/re-signs his baptismal covenant, he worries about the efficacy of the sacrament in his own case. He knows that Baptism is the gateway to, not a guarantee of redemption. The words "decay'd" and "betray'd" in the octave latently intimate that baptismal betrothal might be ephemeral in his case, a possibility forlornly acknowledged when the narrator shifts from a celebration of the sacrament in the octave to trepidation over demonic possession in the sestet.

And the dread reflected in the narratively and structurally distorted sestet serves to cast a backward light on a key sequence in the octave where the narrator enumerates the Trinitarian series defining his ideal personal identity—servant, sheep, temple. These are conventional Christian icons of the baptismal "sealings" of the Trinity, and as such they apply to the potential outcome of the redeemed soul. For the unredeemed, however, the Trinitarian series—servant, sheep, temple—suggests a progressive diminishment of human status. Read in terms of the narrator's fear of unregeneracy—a fear that has imperceptibly worm-holed his hope in the octave—these images imply a declension from Adamic rank (title) as a son of God, to servant, to animal (sheep), to object (temple). Because the narrator sees no unambiguous indication of the efficacy of Baptism in his own life, he dreads the possibility of its de-sacrilized opposite: the declension of his identity from being a son of God destined to eternal life to being mere earthly material destined only to decay. In effect, he fears that in his fallen state the resigning has not taken, that his end bears no salvific resemblance to its divine Type.

The latent threat of declension in the otherwise positive iconographic servant-animal-temple sequence would emerge only if another triple sequence is realized: if the devil "usurpe[s]," "steale[s]," and "ravish[es]" him. These images imply the illegal acquisition of the titular property claims of the Trinity. In the sestet "usurpe" points to the possibility that the devil might assert illegal ownership and take possession of the narrator's soul and body, more properly the "temple of [the Holy] Spirit." "Steale" indicates that the devil might poach/kidnap the narrator from the Son's flock, and "ravish" refers to the possibility that the devil might carry off (away from a place as well as a belief) the narrator-servant, who was made by and for God the Father. In short, the list of these consecutive fears expressed in the sestet inverts the normal baptismal and signing Trinitarian order expressed in the octave. As if mimicking the parodic use of the reversed sign of the cross in Satanic ritual, the sestet imagines the demonic confiscation of the property of the Holy Spirit, the Son, and the Father—in this inverted sequence.

That Satan should be on the narrator's mind while he attempts to re-sign/re-affirm his baptismal covenant is to be expected; for, as we observed earlier, in the baptismal rite the candidate first renounces the devil before he proclaims the Christian creed. In fact, in the christening ceremony authorized by *Rituale Romanum*, Martin Luther's 1523 rite, and Thomas Cranmer's 1552 Anglican ceremony exorcism is an explicit feature of receiving the sacrament. In the *Apostolic Constitutions*, an early pseudo-Apostolic collection of treatises on Christian discipline, worship, and doctrine, the baptismal vows read: "I renounce Satan and his works and his pomps and his worship and his angels and his inventions and all things that are under him. And I associate myself to Christ and believe and am baptized into one unbegotten being."[31] The invocation of the Trinity, especially in relation to the use of the sign-of-the cross during the baptismal service, likewise parallels the language of exorcisms: "And then ye bless you with the sygne of the holy crosse, to chase away the fiend with all his deceytes. For, as Chrysostome sayth, wherever the fiends see the signe of the crosse, they flye away, dreading it as a staffe that they are beaten withall."[32] Such signing figured in the popular belief, as recorded in *Malleus Maleficarum*, that even baptized children can be seized by the devil if "they have not been protected by the sign of the Cross."[33]

Baptism, the sacrament of the Trinity enhanced by the sign of the cross, is the narrator's only hope. He belongs either to Christ or to Satan—there are no other options. It is either sacramental sealing or diabolic stealing. Satan seizes the uncovenanted, the narrator knows, frightened that he might be possessed (in two senses) by the devil. This is why the renewal of his baptismal vows is especially urgent. A successful renewal, it is fair to say, would be akin to the re-baptism that Reginald Scott, among others in the sixteenth century, advised concerning the cure of the bewitched and the demonically possessed.[34]

In short, despite its emphasis on diabolism—including its decline in emotional register and in Petrarchan standard—the sestet never disconnects narratively or structurally from the baptismal sacramentalism introduced in the octave. Just as Satan attempts to invert divine will and just as the human sinner looks away from God, the sestet merely effects

a mirrorlike reversal of the promise of the octave. The divine ideal reflected in that mirror, however, remains eternally unchanged—and eternally attractive because thusly reflective. Satan may invert divine truth, the human sinner may turn away (*aversari* in Augustinian terms) from God, and the narrator's sestet may reverse the aesthetic and liturgical standard, but all of these actions are always defined against and are always undercut in the end by the everlasting Trinitarian order. This Trinitarian order, as represented by Baptism and the hope-engendering salvific numbers 12 and 144 in the sonnet, fully encompasses the sestet's doubt and despair, albeit through a glass darkly due to the speaker's near infantile recalcitrance.

The structural tension, theological ambiguity, and emotional vacillation between hope and despair, the sacred and the secular, that characterize the interplay of the octave and the sestet all reflect the narrator's uncertainty over his personal status as legal and sacramental property. He recognizes the significance of his attempted baptismal renewal, and he has great expectations. He expects his identity as a property laid claim to by "many titles" to, in turn, "entitle" him. He believes that the efficacy of Baptism in his case should be clearly manifest to him, right now. Since he cannot discern such unambiguous evidence of baptismal efficacy in his own life, he is more than disappointed in the sestet; he is terrified that he has become the possession of, possibly possessed by, Satan. Renewing his baptismal vows, invoking the Trinity, even signing himself—all features of the octave of the sonnet—have led the narrator not to assurance but, instead, to a despondency approaching despair. What has gone wrong?

Donne's narrator counts on more than he is entitled to anticipate, given his indebted relation to the many-titled God. He is not entitled to an unambiguous indication of the efficacy of Baptism in his life. His is a vain expectation, and it is potentially idolatrous, since it suggests that sacramental efficacy depends less upon inscrutable divine will than on the humanly directed baptismal ritual itself. In his christening sermon Donne remarks, "a Man may perish eternally in *baptisme*, if he take it, for satisfaction of the State" (5:108). In the sestet the narrator

exhibits a near superstitious inclination, as if the baptismal ritual itself (rather than its Trinitarian authority) will be efficacious if it is performed with technical accuracy.

The narrator needs to recall the Christic model. The central element of the redemptive narrative—Christ's baptismal humanity—has been overlooked by Donne's speaker in what amounts to a tantrum worthy of George Herbert in its willful self-pity. Even Jesus did not enjoy the sort of certitude Donne's narrator demands from Baptism. In fact, by accepting the rite as administered by John the Baptist, Jesus specifically identified himself with the human condition, including temptation, suffering, and death. What could be more human than Jesus's anguished cry from the cross, echoing Davidic prayer (Ps. 22:1): "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" (Matt. 27:46).

The narrative of Christ's temptation by Satan (Matt. 4:1-11; Mark 1:12-13; Luke 4:1-13) has traditionally been connected to the baptismal ceremony. In fact, the vows of Baptism—renunciation of the world, the flesh, and the Devil—are drawn directly from this New Testament episode and the enormous amount of commentary it engendered in the early and medieval church. The ceremony could be dramatic: in instances where the sacrament was administered to an adult, for example, the catechumen in the vestibule faced to the West (symbolizing the abode of darkness), stretched out his hand, sometimes spat out in defiance and abhorrence of the devil, and then made his abjuration of Satan and all his works, followed by an explicit promise of submission to Christ. During this betrothal ceremony the catechumen turned towards the East, the region of light.[35]

Such rejection of Satan and betrothal to Christ (as the light in the East) mandated by the baptismal vows are, as we have seen, reflected in "As Due by Many Titles." References to image, sheep and temple may connect with the iconography of Solomon's Temple, for it was traditionally held that its portico roof was the site of Satan's effort to convince Jesus to leap to his death—a pinnacle possibly serving as the prototype for the narrator's temptation to despair at the brink of the sestet. Solomon's Temple inspired the imagination of both Donne (for example in "A Nocturnall on S. Lucies Day") and his contemporaries

as a model for the perfect Christian man.[36] In the sonnet the speaker's "selfe" focus, with its related disordering of his meditative movement through Father, Son, and Spirit, does not conform to this model. The Christian who does not fulfill the Type of Solomon's Temple is vulnerable to usurpation by Satan.

To put on Christ is to put on his human suffering, including his human vulnerability to temptation. "In *baptisme*, (that is, in the profession of Christ)," Donne writes, "we are delivered over to many tribulations" (5:110). This is what the narrator fails to recall when he anticipates his conversion into God's "owne worke" as a result of the seal of Baptism. And for the Christian, some time must be spent donning helmet and girding loins, for the putting on of Christ is a constant activity in the regenerative process. This is one of the meanings of "resign," which includes trust in the fact that "howsoever [baptismal] waters be afflictions, they are *waters of life* too": "Though baptisme imprint a *crosse* upon us, that we should not be ashamed of *Christs crosse*, that we should not be afraid of our *owne crosses*, yet by all these waters, by all these *Crosse ways*, we goe directly to the eternall life, the kingdome of heaven" (5:110). Donne suggests an ongoing reaffirmation of baptismal commitment as he dramatizes a narrator who resorts to the word "resign" without understanding all of its implications.

Although Donne's narrator engages in a kind of rearming as he renews his baptismal vows, the tension he feels between hope and despair remains unresolved at the end of the sonnet. And for good reason, theologically: the Christian is meant always to ask "Is there Life after life?" To expect, as the narrator expects, a comforting resolution of what feels like a tug-of-war not only within himself but also between God and Satan is a mistake. Such a presumptive anticipation, based on *cupiditas* rather than on *caritas*, abets rather than mediates Satan's temptations. When the narrator initially "resigns" himself, he expresses humility; but by the end of his prayer he also displays his pride, both in his initial presumptive hope and in his subsequent near-despair over insufficient evidence of his regeneration. He remains focused on "his own, individual behalf" rather than on conforming to the model of the

Christ celebrated in Baptism.[37] Should he persist in presenting the wrong self, a failure of nerve in his own humanity would be imminent. Then the latent threat of declension from human to inanimate object, the demonic inversion of the otherwise positive iconographic servant-animal-temple sequence, would result. Such an inversion of the Trinitarian ideal would amount to wrongful possession, when the devil would "usurpe," "steale," and "ravish" what should be God's covenanted property.

As we have seen, then, the narrator's vexed effort to renounce Satan and affirm Christ in "As Due by Many Titles" represents an informal effort to renew his baptismal vows. The theological and poetic matrix in which this dramatic representation of the narrator emerges includes a traditional, albeit intricate, connection between the Trinity, Baptism, and the sign of the cross. In seventeenth-century Roman Catholic and Anglican liturgy, Baptism and the sign of the cross were understood as related inaugural rituals. The significant degree to which this sacrament, signing, and Trinitarianism inform "As Due By Many Titles" provides internal narrative and structural evidence for positioning this poem at the head of the *Holy Sonnets*.

Finally, we would like to take the sonnet's emphasis on baptismal renewal a step further, admittedly into the realm of speculation involving Donne's "conversion" to the Church of England and his entry into the ministry. In the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke the narrative of Christ's temptation, which informs the baptismal vows, is aligned with both Jesus' own baptism and with the beginning of his public ministry, as if to prepare him for his great work. If, as we have argued, "As Due by Many Titles" inaugurates the sequence of the *Holy Sonnets*, it may do so specifically in relation to a private ceremony celebrating Donne's entry into the Church of England, even, perhaps, into Holy Orders.[38]

For Donne this re-signing would entail, as well, a rethinking and a reiteration of his commitment to the Word. "As Due by Many Titles" takes an especially poignant look at the precarious situation of the fallen soul poised between the hope offered the newly selved in Christ and the

doubt engendered by spiritual narcissism. But Donne's sonnet, because it is a *holy* sonnet, must address the quandary of the fallen artist. If the Christian is drawn with Christ to the pinnacle of the Temple for testing, so too the divine poet is drawn to the pinnacle of his own monument for testing. Its name is Babel, a conventional emblem for vain human undertakings, including artworks always structurally vulnerable to linguistic collapse. Ever the master of wit, Donne gives us a poem that is as much about the inadequacies of poetic craft as it is about the failure of spiritual nerve. In both cases, a re-signing begins the sequence of proper selving.

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Notes

1. John Donne, *The Divine Poems* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1952), p. xli. All quotations from the *Holy Sonnets* are from this edition. See pp. xxxvii-lv for her rationale for dating and order of the sequence.

2. Robert V. Young, "Donne's Holy Sonnets and the Theology of Grace," *"Bright Shootes of Everlastingness": The Seventeenth-Century Religious Lyric*, ed. Claude J. Summers and Ted-Larry Pebworth (Columbia: Univ. of Missouri Press, 1987), p. 39.

3. The *Rituale Romanum*, which contains all the services performed by a priest that are not in the Missal and Breviary, had no uniform book until 1614 when Paul V published the first official edition. All liturgical editions are based on this, in conformity with the Decree of the Sacred Congregation of Rites of 8 Jan., 1904.

4. Scriptural citations are to the King James Bible of 1611, although Donne's reference to the final book of the New Testament as "Apocalypse" rather than "Revelation" is retained.

5. *A Catechisme* (London: John Daye, 1570), tr. Thomas Norton, p. 71.

6. Newell, p. 71.

7. Young, p. 27.

8. Theresa M. DiPasquale, *Literature and Sacrament: The Sacred and the Secular in John Donne* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1999), p. 32.

9. "Re-Signing the Text of the Self: Donne's 'As Due by Many Titles'," in *"Bright Shootes of Everlastingness,"* p. 64.

10. *The Sermons of John Donne*, ed. George R. Potter and Evelyn M. Simpson (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1962). Passages are cited by volume and page number within the text.

11. G. J. Cuming, *A History of Anglican Liturgy* (London: Rodker, 1928), p. 82.

12. Di Pasquale, p. 2.

13. Ibid., p. 10.

14. Ibid., p. 31.

15. *Rationale divinorum officiorum* (1286). 8 vols. (Mainz: Fust and Schoeffer, 1459), 5:2.13.

16. *"In Joannis Evangelium. Tract L, Capp. xi & xii." Patrologia Cursus Completus. Series Latina* (Paris: J. P. Migne, 1886) 35:1763 . More specifically, the Latin reads: *habes Christum et in praesenti et in futuro: in praesenti per fidem . . . per Baptismatis sacramentum, in praesenti per altaris cibum et potum.*

17. Newell, p. 72.

18. Arno Esch, *Englische Religisöse Lyrik des 17. Jahrhunderts: Studien zu Donne, Herbert, Crashaw, Vaughan* (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer, 1955) 11:49; John N. Wall, Jr., "Donne's Wit of Redemption: The Drama of Prayer in the Holy Sonnets" *Studies in Philology* 73 (1976): 193-94.

19. "John Donne Awry and Squint: The 'Holy Sonnets,' 1608-1610," *Modern Philology* 86 (1989): 361.

20. Young, p. 28; Hester, pp. 65-66.

21. Hester, pp. 62-63.

22. Ibid., p. 60.

23. Young, p. 27.

24. Hester, pp. 65, 63.

25. Hester, pp. 67-68, points out other instances of witty diminishment in the final three lines: a "saucy" pun on "well" as "sinless," ironic internal rhyme ("chuse"/"lose"), relegation of "mee" to a feminine rhyme, and hence deprived of metrical importance.

26. Ibid., p. 68.

27. Ibid., n. 10, examines fully the problem of the full stop vs. a compound sentence.

28. Ibid.

29. "The Successive Arrangements of Donne's 'Holy Sonnets,'" *Philological Quarterly* 60 (1981): 337-38.

30. "'Little Worlds Made Cunningly': Significant Form in Donne's Holy Sonnets and Goodfriday," *Philological Quarterly* 72 (1975): 329-30.

31. "*Constitutiones Apostolice, Lib. III, Caput. xviii.*" *Patrologia Cursus Completus. Series Graecae* (Paris: J. P. Migne,1902) I:799.

32. *The myroure of Oure Ladye, containing a devotional treatise on divine service, with a translation of the offices used by the sisters of the Brigittine Monastery of Sion, at Isleworth, during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries*, ed. John Henry Blunt (London: N. Trubner & Co., 1873), p. 80.

33. Heinrich Kramer and James Sprenger, *The Malleus Maleficarum of Heinrich Kramer and James Sprenger* (London: Rodker, 1928; repr. New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1971), tr. Montague Summers, p. 100.

34. *Discoverie of Witchcraft* (London: Henry Denham for William Brome, 1584), p. 440.

35. *The Catholic Encyclopedia* (1907), s.v."baptismal vows."

36. Kate Gartner Frost, "'Preparing towards her': Contexts of *A Nocturnall upon S. Lucies Day*," in *John Donne's "desire of more,"* ed. M. Thomas Hester, (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1996), pp.163-65.

37. Wall, p. 192.

38. Gardner identified "As Due by Many Titles" as first of the six sonnets referred to in "To E. of D. with six holy Sonnets"; these, with "the seaventh [which] hath still some maime" (l.8), are worth examining as a hexaemerally structured sequence, a schema not uncommon in the period and one into which "As Due by Many Titles" fits thematically and arithmetically.