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Coverings and Other Paraphernalia in Donne's "To his Mistress going to bed"

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John Donne's love elegy "To his Mistress going to bed" (*ElBed*) is ostensibly a poem of uncovering, as evidenced by the series of imperative verbs employed by the persona commanding the mistress to undress and the exclamatory statements, "Oh my America, my newfound land" and "Full nakedness, all ioyes are due to thee" (27, 33).[1] Further, this elegy reads as a poem of display, one in which Donne performs his wit by creating a speaker who calls for his mistress to reveal herself erotically. As such, Donne's poem exhibits generic elements of amatory elegy that include the type of ribald sensuality and illicit sexuality that would certainly have entertained Inns of Courts students and that, thereby, support Arthur Marotti's description of the Elizabethan love elegy as "young men's poetry," a kind of literary "sport" in which Donne and his contemporaries were "competitively engaged."[2] Nevertheless, Donne's *Elegies*, including *ElBed*, are more than witty displays broadcasting Donne's abilities in order to secure his political ambitions, for even as *ElBed* overtly promotes the language and imagery of discovery, it simultaneously comments on the need for secrecy and coverings. As a result, *ElBed*

[1]*The Variorum Edition of the Poetry of John Donne*, The Elegies, Volume 2, gen. ed. Gary Stringer (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2000), p. 163. All references to Donne's *Elegies* are quoted from this edition and are cited in the text by line numbers. Note: *ElBed* is the short form title designated in the Donne Variorum.

[2]Marotti, *John Donne, Coterie Poet* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1986), p. 44.

and Donne's other love elegies open possibilities for reading them, through their pervasively equivocal mode, in terms of the conditions of English recusants, including those in his own family, and the ways in which the religious polemic writings in his time eroticize the circumstances and practices of recusancy. After all, the love triangles, obstacles to consummation, and secrecy and fear of discovery that generically characterize amatory elegy also echo the conditions of English Catholics during the reign of Elizabeth I.

Communicated through the eroticized language found in the counter-cultural tradition of the classical Roman love elegy, Donne's *Elegies* call attention to the dilemma confronting English Catholics in the 1590s. Instead of the displacement of *fama* for the pursuit of illicit affairs advocated by Ovid and Propertius, Donne reimagines the genre by portraying the impossible conflicts of being both faithful to one's church and loyal to one's country. English Catholics were caught between Jesuit missionaries to England (who warned that conforming to the Church of England imperiled their souls) and the State's penal laws (which condemned recusants as traitors and threatened them with economic ruin, prison, and banishment or death). Nevertheless, the myriad responses to managing recusancy, both by Elizabeth's government and by English Catholics, betray the civic and domestic practices that undermined the legal and ecclesiastical ideals being negotiated by State and citizen alike. It is these disparities, and their intended and unintended civic and household consequences, that Donne dramatizes in his anti-erotic conflations of love and lucre and his purposefully skewed analyses of essence vs. accidents that permeate the *Elegies*, and that Donne vividly explores in "To his Mistress going to bed."

In her study *Church Papists*, Alexandra Walsham comments that being a conforming Catholic "was not a posture of apathy, but one of moral dilemma—a scrupulous as well as pragmatic answer to the problem of proscription."[3] During the age of Elizabeth, Catholicism was relegated, because of legal persecution, to a household religion, but the pressures confronting English Catholics forced the practice of their private faith into public view, with public consequences. On the

[3]Walsham, *Church Papists: Catholicism, Conformity and Confessional Polemic in Early Modern England* (Woodbridge, England: Boydell Press, 1993), p. 95.

one hand, while the State showed its reluctance to hold individuals accountable for their consciences, it was intent on determining how public actions exposed one's conscience.[4] The penal laws sought to enforce conformity by requiring civic officials to swear the Oath of Supremacy, and the same requirement existed for candidates taking university degrees, who were forced to subscribe by age sixteen. Because of this last statute, Dennis Flynn comments that Donne and his brother Henry not only matriculated at Oxford University's Hart Hall, whose principal was a Catholic supporter, but also, like other Catholic students, enrolled "before the age of twelve."[5] Further, in addition to the State's efforts to bring the actions of recusant wives under public scrutiny (which is examined in greater detail below), legislation was frequently introduced and debated, though never confirmed as statute, that sought to remove children from their convicted recusant parents and place them in Protestant homes.[6]

On the other hand, many of the more prominent priests urged conforming Catholics to defy the State. Insisting that English Catholics were to be known not only by their faith, but also by their actions, such priests as Henry Garnet and Robert Persons contended that the *signum distinctivum* of a Protestant was the act of attending a Protestant church.[7] Garnet even maintained that English Catholic

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[4]See Frances Dolan, *Whores of Babylon: Catholicism, Gender, and Seventeenth-Century Print Culture* (University of Notre Dame Press, 1999), p. 62.

[5]Flynn, *John Donne and the Ancient Catholic Nobility* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1995), p. 131, who notes further that although John was 12 and Henry was 11 when they began their studies, both "lied about their ages at matriculation, each of them subtracting a year."

[6]See Dolan, p. 137; and Walsham, *Charitable hatred: Tolerance and intolerance in England, 1500–1700* (Manchester University Press, 2006), p. 87. Also, Marie B. Rowlands, "Recusant women, 1560–1640," in *Women in English Society, 1500–1800*, ed. Mary Prior (London and New York: Methuen, 1985), notes briefly that some recusant wives "were put into the custody of Protestant leaders" (p. 154).

[7]See Garnet, *An apology against the defence of schisme*, 1593, pp. 131–45; and Persons, *A brief discourse containing certain reasons why Catholics refuse to go to church*, 1580, pp. 15^{v}–18. In addition, Walsham notes that "an even more hair-splitting solution described by the Jesuit Henry Garnet in 1593 was to send a proxy to inhabit an enclosed pew with the aim of deceiving the congregation and vicar" (*Charitable hatred*, p. 191).

women should divorce husbands who forced them to attend Protestant services or who otherwise jeopardized their spiritual well-being.[8] Furthermore, Catholic moral theologians forbade English Catholics as a matter of conscience to participate in civic life by serving as magistrates, notaries to bishops, town mayors, bailiffs, constables, or justices.[9] Thus, as Frances Dolan concludes, "Catholic privacy—whether that meant the household as site of worship and resistance or the unknowable hearts and minds of Catholic subjects—was political, contested, public."[10]

Because of the pressures confronting English Catholics, the decisive factors for deciding whether or not to conform were for many based on not only moral reasons, but also economic ones. Many English Catholics were confronted with choosing between being faithful to their Church and protecting their fortunes since recusancy brought with it the potential for serious measures being taken against one's personal wealth. In particular, the 1581 Act of Uniformity raised the recusancy fine from 12 pence (the amount determined in the 1559 Act) to a debilitating £20 per month, which if defaulted could result in losing up to two-thirds of one's lands by sequestration.[11] In order to secure themselves against such financial peril, some Catholic husbands and wives, in what Walsham labels "the management of dissent,"[12] conspired by assuming distinctive roles, the husband taking on the public figure of a conforming Catholic and the recusant wife maintaining the household's private Catholic identity.

In its own way, the Elizabethan State also assumed a conflicted approach to its moral and legal reactions against recusancy through its civic insistence on love of country and its economic pursuit of lucre. While the penal laws defined non-conformity as treason, the State repeatedly demonstrated its preference for collecting fines, rather than imprisoning and executing those found guilty of recusancy. In fact, the crown came to rely on recusancy fines to bolster the English

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[8]Garnet, *A treatise of Christian renunciation*, 1593, pp. 10–11, 100–01, and 144–48.

[9]See Peter Holmes, *Resistance and Compromise: The Political Thought of the Elizabethan Catholics* (Cambridge University Press, 1982), p. 116.

[10]Dolan, p. 92.

[11]See Walsham, *Charitable hatred*, p. 85.

[12]*Church Papists*, p. 81.

treasury to the extent that the fines, according to Walsham, "evolved into a kind of luxury tax," and as such, Dolan elaborates, "it was almost as if wealthy recusants could rent from the state the right not to go to church."[13] It is in relation to such circumstances that in his love elegies Donne suggests the precarious and morally-suspect situations into which recusants were being forced by means of his repeated conflations of love and lucre.

In "Oh let not me serve so," for example, the persona refuses to be like "those idolatrous flatterers" who "no tribute haue" and insists, "Such Seruices I offer, as shall pay / Themselues" (5–9). By situating the persona's relationship with his "faythles" (13) mistress in the language of court service, Donne calls attention to both the problem of discerning the faithful from the feigning and, correspondingly, the paradox that the very means that may "at once fatten" the Queen's coffers will also "sterue" (2) many who could very well be loyal, loving subjects. In "Loues Progress" Donne's conflation of love and lucre takes a decidedly salacious turn. After describing Cupid as "an infernall God, and vnder ground / With Pluto dwells, where gold, and fire abound" (29–30) and identifying a woman's genitals as "her India" (65), Donne contrasts women's mouths with their vaginas thusly:

> Rich Nature hath in woman wisely made
> Twoe Pursses, and their mouthes aversly laid
> They then which to the lower tribute owe
> That way, which that Exchequer looks, must goe.
> (91–94)

In his lewd and anti-erotic language, Donne purposefully aligns the economic and the sexual by confusing higher and lower (that is, moral ideals with physical location) in the poem's larger consideration of "The right true end of loue" (2), a confusion that echoes the moral and financial dilemmas facing those forced to choose between declaring their allegiances to "th'imperiall knee" of the State or "the Papall foote" of the Church (83–84). In other words, the direction of the speaker's progress (either from the head downwards, or the foot upwards) determines if the Elizabethan State or the Catholic Church

[13] *Charitable hatred*, p. 258; Dolan, p. 33.

will have the supremacy in receiving his affections and his access to wealth.

Donne reserves his most extended expression of this trope for "The Bracelet." Referring to the gold coins he will have to sacrifice in order to replace the bracelet he gave to his mistress that is now lost, the speaker describes the coins as his "twelve righteous Angels" (9), his "innocents" (17) who are "harmelesse" (49). The speaker, who either cannot or will not empathize with whatever emotions his mistress may be feeling, obsesses on his gold coins and "the bitter cost" of melting them down to fashion a new bracelet:

> Shall they be damn'd and in the furnace throwne
> And punisht for offenses, not their owne.
> They saue not me, they do not ease my paynes
> When in that hell they'are burn'd and tyed in chaynes.
> (19–22)

As a further extension of this passage, which alludes to the biblical story of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego (Daniel 3:8–30), the speaker later opines, "Unto the fire these Martyrs I betray" (82).[14] The mistress, however, has apparently responded by noting that "the gold doth still remaine, / Though it be chang'd, and put into a chaine" (69–70), which the speaker counters, stating, "forme gives being, and their forme is gone" (76). Donne's wit reveals itself here in the persona's appropriation of the philosophical distinction regarding the

[14]In his biographical reading of this elegy, Cain, "Elegy and Autobiography: 'The Bracelet' and the Death of Henry Donne," *John Donne Journal* 23 (2004), notes that Donne's attitude to his brother's circumstances for harboring a priest was further complicated by the fact that Henry's death made Donne "substantially wealthier, increasing his inheritance by half as much again," and thus "Roman Catholicism, martyrdom, betrayal, loss, judgement and gold converge powerfully in Donne's life as they do in 'The Bracelet'" (p. 41). See also, Stella Revard, "Donne's 'The Bracelet': Trafficking in Gold and Love," *John Donne Journal* 18 (1999): 13–23, who as part of her larger analysis of Donne's literary debt to the conventions of Roman elegy, states that these railings by the persona reflect "the tension between practical commercial matters—the necessity of emptying one's purse of money to provide the gift—and the higher principles of love and even religion" (p. 14).

gold's essence for the anti-erotic purpose of defending his greed, as well as through the poem's emotional and religious hyperbole that reminds us that gold corrupts, regardless of the form it takes. In the witty interplay of the passage quoted above, Donne signals a recusant context in his reference to the story of the three who escaped martyrdom in the fiery furnace, and in doing so, he touches on the knotty legal and ecclesiastical problem of determining who counted as a Catholic or a Protestant, and of distinguishing one from the other not simply for upholding the ideals of justice and religion, but also for securing "filthy lucre." In other words, economic necessity and the threat of financial peril become entwined with the measures for distinguishing between the circumstantial conditions (or accidents) of a citizen and that individual's essence with respect to sectarian allegiance.

English families could avoid the financial consequences of the penal laws by attending Church of England services once a month. But did such behavior actually make one a Protestant? Likewise, if family members attended Church of England services only to return home and conduct Catholic practices, did that make them recusant? Needless to say, the penal laws, and the fines associated with them, thereby placed considerable pressure on the authorities seeking to determine the essence of one's religious allegiance. The problem of sectarian identification is further complicated by those who attended Church of England services but who deliberately abstained from receiving holy communion. Since, as Walsham explains, "non-communicating was not a civil offence in the Elizabethan period," refusing the sacrament allayed the fears of those troubled by the priests' warnings that their souls were in jeopardy if they participated in "Calvin's supper." Nevertheless, non-communicating was not a definitive indicator of being Catholic since the act of refusal was itself "often indistinguishable from innocuous residual folk practices and the behaviour of religious radicals at the other extreme."[15]

It is the vagaries in identifying sectarian identity based primarily on outward behavior that Donne imagines through his witty constructions of the scholastic problem of distinguishing between essence and

[15] *Church Papists*, pp. 86–87.

accidents, a distinction that pervades the *Elegies*.[16] By way of explaining this concept and teasing out some of its multiple implications, I turn to "To his Mistress going to bed," in which the essence vs. accidents dichotomy uniquely coalesces with the other central topics touched on above, namely, the recusant complications regarding the tensions of public and private in religious practices and the confusions of love and lucre in navigating the demands of Church and State.

In the final couplet of *ElBed*, the persona asserts himself as *praeceptor amoris* by pronouncing, "To teach thee I ame naked first," before he then asks, "Why than / What needst thou haue more covering then a man?" Scholars have offered multiple interpretations of the word "covering," including as wordplay on the clothing imagery found throughout the poem, the association with a stallion topping a mare in copulation, and the Pauline directive that women should cover their heads during worship found in 1 Corinthians 11:2–15.[17] However, the verbal leaps that Donne makes throughout the poem, and especially between the words "discouering" (30) and "covet" (38) and "covering(s)" (39, 48), also suggest the legal condition of coverture and, correspondingly, of the *feme covert*.

Under English common law, the legal identity of a married woman (*feme covert*) was thoroughly covered by her husband.[18] At the time of

[16]See "The Bracelet," ll. 69–76; "The Perfume," ll. 57–64 and 69–70; "Oh let not me serve so," ll. 1–10; "Change," ll. 1–36; "The Anagram," ll. 1–56; "On his Mistris," ll. 27–37; "His Picture," ll. 1–20; and "Loues Progresse," ll. 9–36.

[17]See, for example, Wilbur Sanders, *John Donne's Poetry* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1971), p. 106; C. Harold Hurley, "'Covering' in Donne's 'Elegy XIX,'" *Concerning Poetry* 11.2 (1978): 68; Raymond Frontain, "Donne's Erotic Spirituality: Ovidian Sensuality and the Language of Christian Revelation in *Elegy XIX*," *Ball State University Forum* 25 (1984): 50; and Terry Sherwood, *Fulfilling the Circle: A Study of John Donne's Thought* (University of Toronto Press, 1984), p. 73. In addition, M. Thomas Hester, "Donne's (Re)Annunciation of the Virgin(ia Colony) in 'Elegy XIX,'" *South Central Review* 4 (1987): 49–64, suggests that the lines may recall St. Paul's reference to Christ as "covering" in Romans 4:5–7 (pp. 56–57).

[18]See Amy Louise Erickson, *Women and Property in Early Modern England* (London and New York: Routledge, 1993), pp. 24–26. In addition, see Tim Stretton, *Women Waging Law in Elizabethan England* (Cambridge University

her marriage a woman could not, without the consent or assistance of her husband, assert or defend her rights in court, engage in contracts, sue or be sued, inherit legacies, accept gifts, establish a will, or own property. In fact, on a woman's wedding day, all of her chattels (that is, moveable goods) and property (as well as the profits from those lands) passed immediately to the husband's control. While the wife could in many cases regain her property and the legal control over it if she survived her husband, she was again "covered" if she remarried.

While the legal theory of coverture was clear enough, its application was, as Amy Louise Erickson describes it, an "immensely complex" one related to "the extent to which legal responsibility could practically be shared between husbands and wives" because of the fact that in some matters the law regarded a husband and wife as one person, while in others they were treated as several. Donne was, we believe, in residence at Lincoln's Inn, studying law, about the time that he was writing his love elegies. Thus, it is not difficult to imagine why Donne would be drawn to the tangled legal identities of married women, especially since, again as Erickson indicates, during the early modern period so many "legal minds were intrigued by the special nature of women's rights," and residents of the Inns of Court "debated at length the paradoxes and inconsistencies inherent in coverture."[19] In lines 35–43 of *ElBed* Donne signals the type of legal vagaries surrounding coverture by introducing the distinction between essence vs. accidents, specifically through a string of similes by which he comments on those who confuse a woman's clothing and jewelry with the woman herself. In particular, Donne compares the gems that "women vse" to "Atlantas balls" which divert the gaze of "fooles" (35–37),[20] and he likens the arrayment of women to "pictures" or "bookes

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Press, 1998), pp. 22–23, 129–35. For exceptions to coverture through marriage settlements and jointures, see Erickson, pp. 100–51 and Stretton, pp. 26–27.

[19]Erickson, pp. 130–31.

[20]For the mythological details of these lines see Helen Gardner, *The Metaphysical Poets* (Hammondsworth, ENG: Penguin, 1957), p. 23; John Shawcross, *The Complete Poetry of John Donne* (Garden City, NY: Anchor, 1967), p. 58; and Edgar Daniels, "Donne's 'To His Mistress Going to Bed,'" *Explicator* 33 (1975): Item 71. In relation to the critical comments that Donne gets the details of the myth wrong, I wish to add that the gender

gay coverings" that distract the attentions of "lay men" (39–40).[21] Those who are easily sidetracked by such glittering surfaces mistake the essence of women, who "Themselsues are mistique bookes" (41), with the accidents of their outward adornment. In short, as Donne states, "they covet theirs not them" (38).

In spite of the distinction Donne makes in this passage, it is the mistress's accidentals on which he focuses our attention throughout the poem. As Inns of Court residents well knew, and as Donne seems to acknowledge in this elegy, the courts of England permitted wives, over against the strictures of coverture, to retain, as Tim Stretton notes, "at least some rights of ownership of their personal belongings."[22] The property jurisdictions of coverture fell under common law, but for the purpose of inheritance, common law only regulated real property, a designation distinct from personal property. In fact, because "the common law was never meant to be exclusive," Erickson explains, there developed "in fifteenth-century England the system called 'equity,'" which "originated in order to modify what was perceived as the harshness of the common law, and throughout its history a considerable part of the business of equity courts consisted of cases involving the property of married women" (5). A married woman's personal belongings, legally referred to as her "paraphernalia," consisted of her clothes, jewels, bed linens and plate, and by the early modern period paraphernalia could be recovered in

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confusion/inversion of Donne's mythological reference may be intentional and related to gender and power inversions regarding recusant wives and the priests they protected and hid. This association is strengthened by the gender confusion/inversion in ll. 44–45, in which the persona is compared to a midwife.

[21]See Hester, who states that Arthur Barlowe in *Discoveries of the First Voyage* to Roanoke notes that the Indian king Raleigh first encountered in the Outer Banks of present day North Carolina was named Winginia and the country was called by the Algonguins Wingandacon, which means "as you wear good clothes" or "gay clothes" (p. 60). Further, from Raleigh's *History of the World* it is not clear, Hester argues, whether Winginia's use of the word "Wingandacon" was an answer to the question about the name of his country or simply a polite observation about the discoverers (pp. 63–64).

[22]Stretton, p. 28.

equity.[23] The legal faultline created by the subsuming of a wife's property under common law coverture and by a wife's rights regarding her personal belongings under equity complements the dramatic tensions on which Donne centers the poem.

Throughout the elegy Donne identifies the mistress primarily by her paraphernalia: her "girdle, like heauens zones glistering" (5); her "spangled breastplate" (7); the "harmonious chime" (9) of her watch; her "happy buske" (11); her "gownes going off" (13); her "wiry coronet" (15); her "shoes" (17); her "whight robes" and "whight linnen" (19, 45); and the "Gems" (35) that adorn her clothing.[24] The elaborate layering of her clothing and her richly-ornamented accessories establish the woman's wealthy social standing. The mistress's personal property covers her body beneath the items that establish her privilege. After all, it is only through the display of her opulent paraphernalia (her accidents) that the woman is represented at all in the poem. As such, Donne seems to imply that she (in her essence) is legally invisible except for her clothing, jewelry and bed linens. The persona, however, commands her to remove these personal belongings item by item, not because he wishes to possess these items

[23]Erickson notes further that legal considerations regarding a married woman's paraphernalia originally fell under ecclesisastical jurisdiction, "which regulated the division of personal property" and "which was considerably more egalitarian than the common law in so far as it advocated a form of community property within marriage" (p. 5). See also Stretton, who adds that "equity also attempted to alleviate the indignity, and the practical difficulty, of the strict position at law where husbands owned and could sell the very clothes their wives stood up in" (p. 28).

[24]For an informed overview of the articles of clothing Donne specifies in this elegy, see Allison Spreuwenberg-Stewart, "'To his Mistress Going to Bed,' or 'Could You Lend me Your Clothes?'" *John Donne Journal* 18 (1999): 25–59. For additional details regarding "girdle, like heauens zones glistering" (l. 5), see Charles Coffin, *John Donne and the New Philosophy* (Morningside Heights, NY: Columbia University Press, 1937), p. 151; and Hans-Heinrich Freitag, *John Donne: Zentrale Motive und Themen in seiner Liebeslyrik* (Bonn: Bouvier, 1975), p. 66. For "spangled breastplate" (l. 7), see Alexander Grosart, *The Complete Poems of John Donne*, 2 vols. (London: Printed for Private Circulation by Robson & Sons, 1872–73), 1:225; and Helen Gardner, *John Donne: The Elegies and the Songs and Sonnets* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965), p. 131.

for himself, but because he desires to demonstrate his control over the woman by exerting his power to control her personal belongings.

Although *ElBed* is a poem distinguished by its high number of imperative verbs (13 total), it is a poem that concludes with a question ("Why than / What needst thou haue more covering then a man?"). On the one hand, this question indicates the persona's desire to cover the woman's body sexually; on the other hand, it serves to inform both the string of imperative verbs that it follows and the paraphernalia enumerated by the persona's commands. In other words, Donne's question and his witty use of the word "covering" may indeed articulate the persona's desire to control the woman's body *and* her personal belongings.[25]

But then we ask, what claim does the persona have over the woman? After all, there is no reason to believe that Donne is not imitating Ovid, Propertius, and the other Roman love elegists by identifying the relationship in this poem as anything but an adulterous affair. As such, we do well to remember that in early modern England men believed that they belonged on top, even in illicit relationships.[26] Given the tension between these cultural constructions, the persona seems to be revealing his anxieties regarding male dominance by insisting not only on covering his mistress's naked body with his own, but also on controlling the removal of her personal coverings. However, in addition to the persona's need to affirm his culturally-determined male prerogative, there is a wrinkle in the coverture laws that seems to be at play here as well.

While coverture was legally restrictive for married women generally, the limits of the law allowed for an unintended consequence that actually protected the recusant activities of Catholic wives. The penal laws not only subjected those who were convicted to fines and forfeiture of property, but also forbade them to transact legal business, serve on juries, testify as witnesses, and practice professions or hold offices.[27] However, because married women, under the strictures of

[25]Here Donne's persona acts in much the same manner as Petruchio, who seeks to tame Kate in Shakespeare's *The Taming of the Shrew* by exercising control over her paraphernalia.

[26]See Laura Gowing, *Domestic Dangers: Women, Words, and Sex in Early Modern London* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), p. 187.

[27]See Dolan, pp. 72–75; and also Rowlands, pp. 150–56.

coverture, had no goods or estates to seize and could not serve as independent legal agents, the penal laws posed no threat to them. Furthermore, even though husbands were the legal heads of their families and were expected to ensure religious conformity in their households, a husband could not be held legally responsible for his wife's criminal acts.[28] Coverture thus permitted Catholic wives to evade legal scrutiny by means of the very principle that made them legally invisible, thereby playing, as Dolan explains, "one set of legal disabilities against another, the 'feme covert' against the recusant."[29]

Needless to say, the legal inaccessibility that recusant wives found in the loopholes of coverture infuriated and frustrated the Elizabethan justices, who throughout the 1580s sought, with little success, to control recusant wives without undermining the gendered hierarchy that is the basis for coverture. During the early 1590s, there was increased legal debate regarding the problem of recusant wives. In February 1593, Parliament considered two bills that sought to penetrate recusant families and punish non-conformity.[30] The debates over the bills, however, reflect the MPs' substantial discomfort regarding the extent to which the State should intrude into private family life, and a number of MPs, as one contemporary account documents, "had a special eye to the statutes of recusancy, that no such thing might be inserted which might wind them within such a penance."[31]

The admittedly unusual language of being wound "within such a penance" in actuality exposes the cultural anxieties regarding the threats to household and civic order that Catholics in general and

[28]It should be noted that if the husband of a recusant wife died, the woman was then legally exposed and could be fined for her recusancy. Such was exactly the case with Donne's mother, who was fined between her marriages (see R. C. Bald, *John Donne: A Life* [Oxford University Press, 1970], p. 49).

[29]Dolan, p. 65.

[30]See Rowlands, pp. 153–55. For a reading of the 1593 Parliament in relation to Donne's "Satyre 2," see Gregory Kneidel, "Coscus, Queen Elizabeth, and Law in John Donne's 'Satyre II,'" *Renaissance Quarterly* 61.1 (2008): 92–121.

[31]See House of Lords Papers, March–April 1593, fols. 9–11; Cotton MS. Titus F. II, fols. 93–95; and *Statutes of the Realm*, IV. ii. 841–43.

recusant wives in particular were believed to be. The metaphor here alludes to the penitential act of requiring women found guilty of adultery to stand in church in a white sheet.[32] The fact that women were publicly punished for adultery affirms the household as the basic unit of Elizabethan society, since the sexual assertiveness of the wife is a transgression certainly against her family, but also one against the legally defined prerogative of the *paterfamilias*. As such, it is almost predictable that in Elizabethan England threats to household and State order were often characterized in the feminized, and at times erotized, language of female sexual deviance. Such is precisely the case with the 1593 comment about the MPs, which not only refers to the larger legal and legislative problems posed by recusant wives, but also indicates the MPs' concerns of passing a too-precisely-worded bill that might "wind them within such a penance" (that is, legally implicate them), since some of the members had recusant wives and recusant women relatives.[33] Regarding this legal tangle, Gregory Kneidel explains, the Parliamentary debates focused "on the potential danger of phrasing the statutes in such a way that mere associates of recusants and heretics would be caught in the government's religious dragnet."[34]

It is within this political context that I wish to re-examine lines 45–46: "Cast all, yea this whight linnen hence, / Ther is no penance, much lesse innocence."[35] The mistress, addressed as "Madame," seems to be a wealthy citizen's wife, and her "whight linnen," which might be some sort of shift, can also be read as her bed sheet. In either case the item is part of her paraphernalia, and as the mention of "penance" suggests in the next line, if her adulterous affair is discovered, the "whight linnen" will come to symbolize at a public

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[32]See Gowing, pp. 104–05.

[33]See Rowlands, p. 154.

[34]Kneidel, p. 112.

[35]While there is a great deal of critical debate regarding the wording of "much lesse" vs. "due to," my reading follows the text of the Donne Variorum, volume 2. For an overview of the various interpretations of these two readings, see the Notes & Glosses for *ElBed* in the Donne Variorum, volume 2, pp. 731–35. For a full discussion regarding the selection of copy text, see the Textual Introduction and Textual Apparatus for *ElBed* in volume 2 of the Donne Variorum, pp. 165–90.

Protestant service her illicit sexual conduct. In addition, a recusant context for this couplet may be suggested by the preceding lines, in which the speaker pronounces, "Then since I may know, / As liberally as to a Midwife show / Thy selfe" (43–45). While early modern men were suspicious about midwives with regard to the control they exerted over pregnancy and birthing,[36] the term "midwife" was itself used in anti-Catholic polemic to signify those, such as Guy Fawkes, who gave birth to Catholic plots in England.[37] The potential ambiguity of the language here as a means to conceal, even with a metaphor of display, illustrates the ways in which Donne equivocates throughout the poem.

In their interpretations of "To his Mistress going to bed," both R. V. Young and M. Thomas Hester conclude their arguments by emphasizing the poem's equivocation. They question in particular what we are to make of Donne's speaker, Hester admitting that he is unsure "where the mockery of Ralegh's adoration of the Virgin Queen (and its personal motives) begins and Donne's delightful play with the dynamics of the bedroom leaves off," and Young asserting that "we can never really be sure who is speaking these lines, a cynical adulterer or a rapacious *conquistador*." While I have approached the elegy from English recusant contexts related to common law, equity and domestic order, I concur with Young and Hester that "equivocation is central" to the poem precisely because Donne "knew exactly what he was doing" in opening up "a semantic space between tenor and vehicle, between signifier and signified." Young goes on to note that the elegy is equivocal "because Donne, like a Jesuit equivocator, is concealing the identity of the speaker."[38] I wish to explore, however, the possibilities of reading the persona of *ElBed* not simply as one playing the role of a Jesuit equivocator, but instead as a Catholic priest who is having an illicit affair with a wealthy recusant wife.

The speaker describes his desire to have the woman fully naked before him in language that is decidedly religious, and even

[36]See Gowing, pp. 227–28.

[37]See, for example, *Novembris Monstrum; or, Rome Brought to Bed in England, with the Whores Miscarying* (London, 1641), sig. C5.

[38]Hester, 61 and Young, "'O My America, My New-Found-Land': Pornography and Imperial Politics in Donne's 'Elegies,'" *South Central Review* 4 (1987): 45.

scholastic—he refers to the bed as "Loves halowed temple" (18); he compares the mistress's "whight robes" to the arrayment of angels (19–20); he applies to his amorous situation Thomas Aquinas's analogy about the nature of God and the joys of saved souls, stating, "As Soules vnbodied, bodyes vncloth'd must bee, / To tast whole ioyes" (34–35); and distinguishing himself from "lay men," he is one who through "imputed grace" can "see reuealed" the "mistique bookes" (40–43). In the context of English recusancy, even the famous "Oh my America" passage may not, in fact, allude broadly to English imperialism, but instead more precisely to plans for establishing a Catholic colony in America,[39] and thus, the speaker's assertion, "To enter in these bonds, is to be free" (31) carries with it a hope for Catholics of escaping religious persecution in Protestant England.

When we read the speaker as a priest engaged in an affair with a recusant wife, additional legal implications come to bear. During Elizabeth's reign, any priest who was ordained on the Continent was subject to legal prosecution upon crossing back into England,[40] and anyone who harbored a priest could, as Donne well knew from the tragedy with his own brother, be prosecuted for a felony. Nevertheless, Catholic families did harbor priests, and it was the women of these households who played the most prominent roles in providing material support, as well as protection from the law. Because the priests necessarily abandoned their clerical dress, Catholic women not only provided the priests with clothing, but also fed them and sheltered them so that, as Caroline Hibbard states, priests were becoming "domesticated," which brought with it "ambiguous consequences" for the priests' spiritual authority.[41] When we read the persona of *ElBed* as a priest, then it is all the more understandable why he might feel the need to assert his dominance. After all, as I am suggesting here, a Catholic wife's spiritual advisor could very well have

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[39]See Holmes, who states, "in 1582 William Allen rejected the idea of transporting Catholics to Terra Florida, suggesting that it would be a better idea to send puritans instead. At about the same time a plan to set up a Catholic colony in America foundered, despite the patronage of a papist with practical transatlantic experience, George Peckham" (p. 110).

[40]See Rowlands, p. 156.

[41]Hibbard, "Early Stuart Catholicism: Revisions and Re-Revisions," *Journal of Modern History* 52 (1980): 2.

been a man whom she was protecting, and under her domestic authority, the priest's safety was dependent upon him submitting to the woman as she hid him in her house and disguised him in layman's clothing.[42]

Because the women ensured the secrecy of priests by concealing them during house searches, a recurrent explanation in anti-Catholic polemic for why priests were able to avoid detection is that recusant women hid the priests in their beds. Protestant literature also assumed then that a priest occupied the wife's (or daughter's) bed not simply to escape arrest, but primarily to seduce the woman hiding him, further disordering the household.[43] For example, in a Catholic account of the trial of Margaret Clitherow (who was sentenced in 1587 to be pressed to death for hiding a priest), Clitherow is urged by legal councilors to confess that she offended her husband because "she had sinned with priests," and at one point in the trial her accusers state, "it is not for religion that thou harbourest priests, but for harlotry."[44] In addition, Thomas Overbury's satirical character of "*A Iesuite*" expresses similar suspicions about the sexual dalliances of recusant wives and the priests whom they lodge in their households: "No place in our Climate hides him so securely as a Ladyes Chamber; the modestie of the *Perseuant* hath only forborne the bed, & so mist him."[45] Nevertheless, from a legal perspective, it did not matter if priests actually seduced recusant women or not since, with respect to the penal laws, the mere presence of the priest constituted a felonious act. It made no legal difference why the priest was in the woman's bedchamber because the penal laws made no distinction between a priest's performance of his religious office and whatever sexual acts he might be engaged in under the sheets. From the legal perspective then the bed and the confessional collapse into the same space, an equivocal condition which Donne seems to acknowledge in *ElBed*

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[42]See Dolan, pp. 50–51.

[43]*Ibid.*, pp. 90–93.

[44]John Morris, S.J., ed., "Mr. John Mush's Life of Margaret Clitherow," in *The Catholics of York under Elizabeth* (London: Burns & Oates, 1891), pp. 427 and 414, respectively.

[45]Overbury, *New and Choise Characters of seuerall Authors* (London, 1615), sig. M5^{v}.

when the persona/priest expresses to the recusant wife who is his mistress, "Ther is no penance, much lesse innocence" (46).

Like the legal vagaries of the penal laws and of coverture, Donne creates a poem that is richly layered with coverings of all sorts—certainly the paraphernalia that conceals the mistress, but also the common law covering of women's property, the covering of recusant wives beneath the principles of coverture, and the covering of a priest within his mistress's bed. Donne's question at the end of the elegy dramatizes the gender and power tensions of a persona/priest who would subvert the male figure who harbors him by sexually covering his wife who herself, as *feme covert*, covers the identity and location of the priest by concealing him beneath her own bed linens. After all, there is a great deal of hiding in this elegy, and all of it potentially comments on the cultural fears and threats related to household order and the legal measures that may actually propagate rather than remedy such disorder throughout the State. Both State and Church, as Donne would have us understand in this counter-cultural elegy, are complicit. The former by seeking to codify legally the essence of religious allegiance that it then compromises in its preference for collecting monetary fines, and the latter by bifurcating the civic and religious responsibilities of recusant husbands and wives as a means for preserving their religious identities while securing the household fortunes as English citizens. Donne realizes that layering his poems with so much interpretive paraphernalia increases the chances of being misinterpreted, but he also imagines that such equivocal layering opens possibilities of knowing far more than is prudent for the son of a recusant mother to confess nakedly.

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