

## “The Relique,” *The Song of Songs*, and Donne’s *Songs and Sonets*

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Some claim Donne as a fully converted Protestant, while others believe he remained essentially a Catholic, never really abandoning the religion of his family. To complicate further our understanding of Donne’s religious sensibility, I want to discuss an important but unrecognized connection between Donne’s *Songs and Sonets* and the pre-Christian, Hebrew *Song of Songs*. This connection first struck me when in preparing a memorial service for a close friend (a poet in her own right) I came across a passage in the biblical *Song* that seemed a clue to Donne’s enigmatic poem “The Relique.” In this essay, I hope to show how the *Song of Songs* not only illuminates this poem but also bears wider relevance to Donne’s *Songs and Sonets*. There is a remarkable affinity between this beautiful Hebrew poetry and Donne’s, as both celebrate the transforming experience of love. This affinity, however, is hardly uncomplicated. I will suggest that the conflicts about love and sexuality that mark Donne’s poetry might be understood as expressing a profound tension between the erotic ethos of the Hebrew *Song*, with its celebration of sexual love, and the spiritualizing ethos of Paul and Pauline Christianity, with its distrust of the sexed body and sexual desire.

Potter and Simpson have called Donne a “Hebrew scholar,” noting the influence of Hebrew biblical poetry in Donne’s sermons. According to Bald, Donne knew Hebrew better than Greek; Walton says that just before entering the church, he attained “a greater perfection in the learned Languages, *Greek* and *Hebrew*,” a comment that implies Donne already knew Hebrew, though we do not know when or how he first learned it.<sup>1</sup> It is worth considering whether the Hebrew Bible

might have a presence in his love poetry as well as his sermons. An allusion to *The Song of Songs* in “The Relique” provides evidence of the connection.

“The Relique” has received little sustained critical attention, though there are recent signs of growing interest.<sup>2</sup> Still, the poem remains among Donne’s most mysterious. Anne Ferry has described how readers are “excluded from the secret knowledge which the speaker refuses to ‘tell’,” and M. Thomas Hester calls it the best example of “the ‘incomprehensibleness’ of Donne’s poems.”<sup>3</sup> Is the poem deeply spiritual, even platonic in its depiction of these lovers who (we are told) did not know “Difference of sex” and whose “hands ne’r toucht the seales?” Or is it distinctly sexual, fixated on the body, with its sexually suggestive image of the “bracelet of bright haire about the bone?” And how, indeed, are we to understand the relation between the spiritual and sexual, a relation vexed throughout Donne’s writing? Even the nature of the relation between these lovers (like the identity of the beloved woman) remains veiled from the reader as from the imagined people in the future who might think the woman “a Mary Magdalen, and I / A Something else thereby.”

When my grave is broke up againe  
Some second ghest to entertaine,  
(For graves have learn’d that woman-head  
To be to more then one a Bed)  
And he that digs it, spies  
A bracelet of bright haire about the bone,  
Will he not let’us alone,  
And thinke that there a loving couple lies,  
Who thought that this device might be some way  
To make their soules, at the last busie day,  
Meet at this grave, and make a little stay? (ll. 1-11)

Both Dayton Haskin and Maureen Sabine have pointed out the relevance to this poem of Luke, who reports Jesus as saying that those “accounted worthy to obtain that world, and the resurrection from the dead, neither marry, nor are given in marriage” (Luke 20:35).<sup>4</sup> This

suggestion that the ordinary loving bonds between individual men and women will be dissolved at the resurrection and in heaven jars with Donne's imagination of sexual coupling at this "last" day. What has not been noticed, however, is that this stanza also evokes a passage in the *Song of Songs*, whose celebration of human love stands in marked contrast to the celibate implications of Jesus' pronouncement.

The passage occurs in the last chapter of the *Song*, chapter 8, verses 6-7:

Set me as a seal upon thy heart  
As a seal upon thine arm;  
For love is strong as death,  
Jealousy is cruel as the grave;  
The flashes thereof are flashes of fire,  
A very flame of the Lord.  
Many waters cannot quench love,  
Neither can the floods drown it;  
If a man would give all the substance of his house for love,  
He would utterly be contemned.<sup>5</sup>

Coming at the end of the lyric conversations between a woman (the Shulamite) and her lover (thought by some to be Solomon), these verses are the climactic expression of faith in the power of human love.

Donne's luminous image of the "bracelet of bright haire about the bone" recalls this verse where the woman asks to be set as a "seal" on her beloved's arm. I would suggest that Donne's "bracelet" is the "seal" the speaker's mistress has given him and asked him to wear as a sign of her claim on his heart. It is an affirmation of *her* devotion, a sign of their shared love, and thus quite unlike the ambiguous "subtle wreath of haire" in "The Funerall," where the speaker cannot tell "What ere shee meant by't" (l. 17).

This bracelet is just the kind of "seal" that might be construed from the *Song of Songs*. Indeed, biblical interpreters puzzled by "the use of 'arm' *zeroa* [in Hebrew], rather than 'hand,' *yad*" sometimes suggested that the "seal" actually signifies a bracelet. The sexual symbolism of such a love token was well recognized, "the wish to be [worn]

as a jewel or ring” being a “commonplace” in ancient middle eastern bawdy love songs.<sup>6</sup> In “The Relique” as in the *Song*, however, the bracelet or seal on his arm is not only an image of a desired sexual connection but a sign of the power of love in the face of death. The *Song* raises the spectre of death and the grave—the ultimate threat to love—even as it proclaims the strength of love. This is precisely the brave stance of Donne’s poem, which suggests that the lovers are so closely bound by love and desire that, despite death and physically separate graves, they will find a way to “Meet” at the end of time. The Latin Vulgate elides the physicality and finality of the grave, substituting “infernus” for the Hebrew “*She’ol*” (the pit, the grave, the netherworld), but Donne recalls the Hebrew in his unflinching focus on the “grave.” In celebrating a love enduring and constant (“we lov’d well and faithfully”), a love that hopes to triumph over death, Donne’s poem recalls this final chapter of the Hebrew *Song*, with its assertion of the immense and lasting force of love.

But there is a further relevance of The *Song of Songs* that might illuminate Donne’s lyric, for this biblical text was long believed to be a marriage song. The Roman Catholic Church saw in the relation between the male lover and his “bride” (4:8, 10, 12; 5:1) an affirmation of the sacramental nature of human marriage.<sup>7</sup> Though it is possible that the poem, as Dayton Haskin suggests, describes an extramarital loving relation, the allusion to the *Song of Songs*, I think, implies that Donne’s lovers are married,<sup>8</sup> and their relation sacramental, despite unspecified circumstances that doom them to physical separation, even in death. The “bracelet” of hair on his arm is like a wedding band—a pledge of her continuing love, a symbol of the covenant between the lovers.

## I

The *Song of Songs* provides a fascinating context for reading this poem, as the biblical text has posed interpretive problems curiously similar to those raised by “The Relique.” In its eroticism, the *Song of Songs* has seemed to some inappropriate for the Bible—much as Donne’s sexually suggestive “bracelet of bright haire about the bone”

has struck some readers as a “dirty” joke, out of place in a poem about pure love.

As the *Song of Songs* appears in the Hebrew Bible—without interpretive apparatus or moralizing commentary—it is a powerful celebration of intensely erotic, sexual love. Not only does the *Song*’s canonical place in the Bible confer a sacredness on sexual love, but the Hebrew identifies this love with God, calling it *shal’hevetyah* “a flame of *Yah*,” “a very flame of the Lord” (as the JPS translates it). The suffix *yah* means “of God,” though many translators draw back from this sense, seeing the suffix as simply denoting intensity, “an enormous flame.”<sup>9</sup>

This celebration of sexual love and erotic desire as a gift of God has proved problematic for many readers of the *Song of Songs*. The distinctive force of the Hebrew *shal’hevetyah* (a flame of God) disappeared in the Septagint, the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible (by Hellenistic Jews, c. 250 B.C) that Paul and Greek-speaking Jews and Christians used, and that became the source for the Latin Vulgate and other translations. The “flame of God” became simply “flammarum” in the Vulgate, “a vehement flame” in the Geneva Bible, “a most vehement flame” in the King James, and merely “flames” in the Douay translation of the Vulgate. The sense that sexual love and desire are sacred because they come from God, so powerful in the original Hebrew, became obscured in later versions, the Douay Bible even translating 8:7 as “many waters cannot quench charity.”<sup>10</sup>

If the connection between sexual love and God was occluded in translations of this climactic, important word (*shal’hevetyah*), the powerful sexuality of the entire Hebrew *Song of Songs* was similarly diminished. The sophisticated linguistic pattern of double-entendres centering on sexual arousal and intercourse that structures the Hebrew poem was lost in translation.<sup>11</sup> The detailed commentary in Chana and Ariel Bloch’s recent translation shows how persistently translators have obscured the sexual emphasis and eroticism of the poem along with the sexual assertiveness of the woman speaker.<sup>12</sup> Richly metaphoric passages in the Hebrew evoke both the memory and anticipation of sexual intimacy, sometimes even suggesting its present experi-

ence. (I quote from the Bloch translation which captures the eroticism of the original Hebrew.) “And my beloved among the young men / is a branching apricot tree in the wood. In that shade I have often lingered, / tasting the fruit. / . . . Let me lie among vine blossoms, / in a bed of apricot! / I am in the fever of love” (2:3, 5). The woman’s refrain, “His left hand beneath my head, his right arm holding me close” (2:6; 8:3) echoes a “stylized representation of lovemaking” common in ancient middle eastern cultures (Bloch, p. 151). “Let my lover come into his garden and taste its delicious fruit,” she says, with no trace of coyness, naming her body as the garden that is wholly his (4:16). He responds in the next verse, “I have come into my garden, / my sister, my bride, / I have gathered my myrrh and my spices, / I have eaten from the honeycomb, / I have drunk the milk and the wine” (5:1). Not only is the garden clearly a figure for the woman’s body, but the use of the Hebrew verb *ba’ti* “I have come into” or “entered” has a distinctly sexual meaning in biblical Hebrew (Bloch, p. 4) and denotes a completed action. The Hebrew poetry of the *Song* thus clearly indicates not only that the lovers’ relationship is sexual but that it has been fully and repeatedly consummated.<sup>13</sup>

In the Hebrew *Song*, sexual love is deeply integrative. The lush imagery involves all the senses, as the lovers delight in each other’s body, praising thighs, breasts, eyes. Above all, the sense of taste dominates in this, the ultimate poem of oral sex. They hunger for each other, relishing the tastes and scents of the beloved as nourishing, life-sustaining, and precious: He remembers “The wine of your kisses, the spice / of your fragrant oils.” “Your lips are honey, honey and milk / are under your tongue, your clothes hold the scent of Lebanon” (4:10-11). She recalls the pleasure of “tasting” him (2:3). This desire for the body of the beloved is no egocentric, mere bodily lust but the expression of the soul. Five times the woman calls her lover *she’ahavah naph-shi*, “the one whom my soul loves,” from *nephesh* or “soul,” 1: 7, 3:1-4)—a striking epithet that should make us think of Donne’s poems.<sup>14</sup> This love encompasses and awakens the whole self.

If translations of *The Song of Songs* obscured its sexual concerns, “allegorical” interpretations even more seriously de-eroticized the

Hebrew poem. At least as early as the first century, interpreters claimed that the *Song* had to “really” be about something other than erotic, sexual love between two human beings. Interpreters (all of them men) developed allegorical or symbolic interpretations of this most sensuous book of the Bible. These allegorical interpretations violated the integrative ethos of the Hebrew poem, severing spirit and body, spiritualizing the eroticism of its poetry and silencing the woman’s voice, turning the woman’s expressions of desire for her lover’s body into humanity’s assertion of love for a transcendent God. Though we know little about early Jewish readings of the *Song*<sup>15</sup>—and nothing about how women read it—in the first century Rabbi Akiva interpreted its lyrics allegorically, with the marriage between Solomon and his bride as a figure for the covenant between God and Israel. Rabbi Akiva most likely had this reading in mind when he declared the *Song* the most holy book of the Bible. The early Christian Church adapted the Jewish allegorical reading to Christian ends, appropriating the Hebrew *Song* as a typological description of the love between Christ and the Church, between Christ and the souls of believers. Like the Jewish allegorical interpretations, though to a greater extent, Christian typological readings of the *Song* deemphasized the literal preoccupation with sexual love and desire, as they privileged the mystical union between Christ and his Bride, in the process covering the eroticism of the Hebrew verse, replacing the literal meaning (the flesh, as it were) with the figural (the spirit). Denigrating the body and, analogously, the “carnal” meaning of the *Song*, Origen’s influential commentary entirely discarded the literal meaning (the erotic love between the two lovers) as he moved to the poem’s interior or mystical meaning (the soul’s love for God). Medieval Latin commentaries continued the insistently allegorical exegesis, reading the poem as describing the love between God and the Church, or God and the individual soul, or between God and the Virgin Mary.<sup>16</sup> A twentieth-century edition of the Douay Bible still glosses, “His left hand beneath my head, his right arm holding me close,” as “the words of the Church to Christ. *His left hand* signifying the Old Testament, and his *right hand*, the New.”

Nevertheless, the literal sense and sensuousness of the *Song of Songs* were never entirely suppressed. Later rabbinic and kabbalistic commentaries insisted on the holiness of human marriage and married sexual intimacy, teaching that Adam and Eve had consummated their marriage in Eden before the fall with God's blessing, and recommending marital intercourse as an appropriate activity for the sabbath. In Christianity, the impulse of allegorical interpretation to privilege the spiritual at the expense of the physical was to some extent countered by the value the Incarnation gave to the body and human bodily experience. In the twelfth century, the development of marriage as a sacrament was accompanied by a reading of the *Song of Songs* that saw marriage as a worthy analogue for Christ's love of the Church.<sup>17</sup> Christian mystics like St. John of the Cross and St. Theresa revived the passionate sensuality of the *Song*, but their sensuous language expressed not a valuing of human sexuality but the redirection of desire towards God.<sup>18</sup> Spiritualization, which contrasts with the ethos of the Hebrew poem, was the dominant hermeneutic of Christianity.<sup>19</sup> By insisting that the *Song* was "really" about the love between God and the human being, the allegorical interpretations implied a deep suspicion of erotic love between man and woman. The passionate love lyrics of the *Song* could only be a legitimate part of the Bible if they actually described spiritual love between God and the soul rather than sexual love between human beings.

## II

Donne departs from the allegorizing, spiritualizing impulses that had dominated the interpretive history of the *Song*. He recaptures the sense of interconnection between sexual and sacred, physical and spiritual, that distinguishes the ancient Hebrew text. "The Relique" hopes that the *body* (the hair, the bone) will be the means of uniting the lovers' *souls*, as it envisions a final sexual reunion at the resurrection and invokes religious tropes to describe their love. The last stanza of the poem, however, seems at odds with this sense of body-spirit integration, for it seems to imply that the lovers shared a platonic love where sexual intercourse had no part:



First, we lov'd well and faithfully,  
 Yet knew not what wee lov'd, nor why,  
 Difference of sex no more wee knew,  
 Then our Guardian Angells doe;  
 Coming and going, wee  
 Perchance might kisse, but not between those meales;  
 Our hands ne'r toucht the seales,  
 Which nature, injur'd by late law, sets free;  
 These miracles wee did; but now alas,  
 All measure, and all language, I should passe,  
 Should I tell what a miracle shee was. (ll. 23-33)

This stanza has led readers to conclude that the poem celebrates a miraculously spiritual, asexual love, refined of the grossness of sexuality, and a miraculously pure woman. But the appearance of virginal purity created by this stanza may be a device of "concealment" intended to protect the woman's honor, as might the equivocal insistence that their "hands n'er toucht the seales." As a word designating "a piece of wax" or something similar "fixed on a closed . . . receptable . . . in such a way that an opening cannot be effected without breaking it" (*OED* 3.d.), "seals" metaphorically suggests the hymen: the beloved is represented as untouched, intact. Donne's speaker claims a similar virginity for himself. But the poem's insistence on virginal purity contrasts with the startling focus of attention on the genitals. And there may be a sly, sophistic wit: that these lovers' hands never touched those seals does not mean that other anatomical parts did not either. The sexually ambiguous, contradictory implications of the reference to "seals" parallels the similarly equivocal suggestion that those who dig up their relics will think the woman "a Mary Magdalen"—the richly complex biblical figure associated, at once, with purity and sexuality. As witness of Christ's resurrection and his first apostle, Mary Magdalen was supremely attuned to the spirit, truth, and the miraculous. But as she in time became conflated with the penitent sinner in Luke (ch. 7), as she longed to touch Christ's resurrected body (John 20), and as she was in certain traditions even believed to have been Christ's lover, Magdalen was an erotic figure, closely associated with the body and sexuality.<sup>20</sup> Like the mention of

those suggestive “seales,” Donne’s equivocal reference to Mary Magdalen foregrounds the vexed question of the nature of his lovers’ relationship.

I think it far from certain that Donne’s lovers have never been sexually intimate, particularly if we bear in mind the *Song of Songs*. As in the *Song*, there may be nostalgia for past sexual intimacy as well as longing for future intimacy as the speaker describes their relation during a time of immense physical constraint. The reference to their kisses as “meales” might recall not only the Sacrament of the Lord’s Supper, but the *Song of Songs*, where love-making is always imaged in terms of food and eating. The lines “Difference of sex no more wee knew, / Then our Guardian Angells doe” (25-26), which readers have assumed suggest indifference to sexuality as well as gender, might instead denote the intensity and completeness of their union, as in “The Canonization” where the speaker suggests that in the very sex act “to one neutrall thing we fit; / We dye and rise the same” (25-26). The erasure of sexual difference might, that is, be a consequence of their having already experienced intense erotic intimacy.

This is, in fact, what we see in the Hebrew *Song*, where the intensity and mutuality of love and desire blur gender difference, even on a grammatical level. Masculine forms of verbs, pronouns, and suffixes appear where one would expect feminine forms, so that it is often difficult to determine whether the woman or the man is speaking.<sup>21</sup> The lovers’ praises of each other’s bodies are so similar that physically they seem almost identical (cf. 4:1-6; 5:12-16; 6:5-7; 7:1-3). They imagine being brother and sister, sharing the same mother: “my sister, my bride” (5:1), “my sister, my friend” (5:2), he calls her; “If only you were a brother who nursed at my mother’s breast,” she says (8:1)—phrases that designate here, not an asexual, platonic love but an extreme physical and emotional closeness in which sex has a necessary, central part. The *blurring* of gender distinctions in *The Song of Songs* as it celebrates the powerful attraction of sexual *difference* might gloss this problematic stanza of “The Relique.” If I am right, then, far from celebrating a purely spiritual love, the poem longs for a love both sexual and spiritual, even as it acknowledges a period when sexual

consummation is no longer possible. In suggesting that their desire to make love will persist even beyond the grave, “The Relique” thus returns us to the powerful emotions of the original Hebrew *Song*.

### III

I wish to argue further that, in celebrating sexual love as the most valuable experience of life, Donne’s *Songs and Sonets* perhaps do not so much “invent” a modern idealization of love (as Anthony Low has recently argued)<sup>22</sup> as revive the spirit of the ancient *Song of Songs*. Where Ovid’s poetry offered Donne an anti-Petrarchan model for his *Elegies* and the more cynical, flippant lyrics in the *Songs and Sonets*, the Hebrew *Song of Songs* may well have served as Donne’s poetic inspiration for imagining and celebrating the transformative power of erotic love in his celebratory *Songs and Sonets*.

There are important differences, of course. The Hebrew poem grows out of an ancient society and culture, in which people were closely bound to nature, the landscape, and the seasons, a world of jewels and precious spices and the towers of splendid buildings rising in the desert. Donne’s poems are the product of a very different, early modern society, a world where compasses, maps, and taxes (not pomegranates, gazelles, or frankincense) are the resources for metaphor, his lovers locating themselves more often in terms of the city than nature, which for Donne is identified with death and decay, rather than life and creation. The voice of Donne’s poems is almost always the man’s, whereas the female lover in the Hebrew speaks most lines.<sup>23</sup> Nevertheless, the similarities are striking and profound.

Donne’s love poetry shares certain stylistic features with the *Song of Songs*. The *Encyclopedia Judaica* comments, “Bold imagery and striking hyperbole characterize the songs, producing extravagant expressions and incongruous comparisons”<sup>24</sup>—an assessment remarkably like Samuel Johnson’s description of Donne’s metaphysical wit. Moreover, the Hebrew poem is heavily marked by sexual puns, by double, even multiple entendres and the innovative use of the vernacular idiom<sup>25</sup>—distinguishing features of Donne’s poetry as well, and specifically of “The Relique.”

But the connections are not just stylistic. The experience of the *Song*'s lovers finds a persistent echo in Donne's celebrations of mutual love. Much as in "The Canonization," "A Valediction forbidding mourning," or "The Anniversarie," the lovers in the *Song* are represented as special, unique, above all others. "My beloved . . . towers above ten thousand" (5:10). "One alone is my dove," he says, "my perfect, my only one" (6:9). Like Donne's special lovers, they find in each other all happiness, all value. The trope of the lovers as royalty, as well as the hyperbole that they embody riches, spices, and precious jewels, appears in both the Hebrew *Song* and Donne's *Songs and Sonets*. One might compare, for example, "The Sunne Rising," where the "India's of spice and Myne" (l. 17) lie in their bed and "She's all States, and all Princes I" (l. 21), with the *Song of Songs*: in her are "all the rare spices" (4:14), "the gold of [her] thigh" (7:2), "his arm a golden scepter with gems of topaz, his loins the ivory of thrones inlaid with sapphire" (5:14)—though it is typical of the sometimes anxious gender differences in Donne that he identifies land and riches with the woman, whereas in the Hebrew poem they are equally distributed between the male and female bodies.

It is particularly interesting that, as in Donne, the lovers in the *Song of Songs* meet secretly, often at night, for their lovemaking (1:12-13). The lyrics suggest a secret love affair, marked by recurrent separations that give an edge to their desire, and their love is defined in opposition to society's authority figures. It is hard not to think of the similarity to the situations in so many of Donne's poems—"The Flea," where they meet though "parents grudge" (l. 14), the many valedictions about parting.

The woman in the *Song* recounts seeking her lover in the city at night (3:1-4, 5:6-7): "the watchmen found me as they went about the city. They beat me, they bruised me, they tore the shawl from my shoulders, those watchmen of the walls" (5:7). One might recall the complaints of Donne's speaker in "The Canonization" that he had been persecuted, even martyred for love, or the recurrent sense of the clandestine nature of their love, the feared intrusion of authority figures. The private world of Donne's lovers, as it contrasts with the

materialistic preoccupations of the public world of men, echoes the *Song*, with its pronouncement that love cannot be bought, that its value makes worldly wealth look paltry: "If a man tried to buy love with all the wealth of his house, he would be despised" (8:7). As in "The Good-morrow," "The Extasie," or "The Canonization," for the poet of the Hebrew *Song* love is the supremely important experience of life, besides which all else pales. Its experience is utterly "transforming," providing access to the divine.<sup>26</sup>

The feeling for the integrative, spiritual value of sexual love is extremely close in these two poets, though the ways in which the experience of wholeness is imagined and expressed differs.<sup>27</sup> In the *Song*, the lovers become part of the natural landscape of vineyards, pomegranates, doves, ewes, goats, and gazelles ("your eyes are doves," 1:15, "your breasts are two fawns, / twins of a gazelle, / grazing in a field of lilies," 4:5; "My love is a gazelle, a wild stag," 2:9, "the mane of his hair / black as the raven" (5:11). Intense erotic love becomes the supreme integrative experience, connecting the lovers with the flourishing, divinely-created natural world and with each other, blurring differences between them. Donne's lovers are "hemisphaeres" ("The Good-morrow," l. 17), each incomplete without the other, their souls as well as bodies joined ("The Extasie"), and the death of the beloved is like the loss of one's soul ("A nocturnall upon S. *Lucies* day, Being the shortest day"). In the *Song of Songs* Donne would have seen two other lovers for whom life was unimaginable without the other. And here he could have found scriptural encouragement for his hopes that a love, grounded in the body, could survive separation and death.

#### IV

But Donne, for all his celebration of sexual love, never quite escaped the spell of Paul and Augustine, with their profound distrust of sexuality, their sense that the *spirit* is the essence of the human being. The *Song's* celebration of sexual desire, love-making, and the body contrasts sharply with the Pauline texts that shaped Christian thinking about love and sexuality and that had a profound impact on Donne. At

the center of Paul is an opposition between “flesh” and “spirit” (see, esp. Romans, ch. 6-8) entirely foreign to the Hebrew *Song*. Pauline dualism, while it does not reject the body as evil, nevertheless separates body and soul, flesh and spirit, and defines the “spiritual soul” as the true “essence” of a (Christian) human being, identifying “flesh” as the realm of death.<sup>28</sup> Those who are “in Christ Jesus” “walk not after the flesh, but after the Spirit. . . . For to be carnally minded is death; but to be spiritually minded is life and peace. . . . if ye live after the flesh, ye shall die: but if ye through the Spirit do mortify the deeds of the body, ye shall live” (Romans 8:1, 5-6, 13). “Flesh” is not simply coterminous with the body; it encompasses also the mind and soul contaminated with sin. Nevertheless, in Paul the term is often a synonym for the body. Even more to my point, Paul actually uses “flesh” metaphorically to refer to the “penis,” as in biblical Hebrew and Jewish usage. Thus for Paul, the “flesh” that opposes “spirit” and is identified with death, the “flesh” that must be abandoned, is the physical site of male sexuality (Boyarin, *Radical Jew*, pp. 68; see 67-68, 77-79). While the body is to be valued, particularly as transformed by the spirit, the “deeds of the body” that must be “mortified” for the spirit to live are specifically the sexual deeds. Although the Church Fathers’ concern for the resurrection of the body shows an impressive valuing of the body—Jerome and Augustine even imagined that the genitals would be resurrected—it was a body stripped of sexuality. They insisted there would be no use for the sexual organs in heaven; the genitals would be there so the person could show a final victory over sex and thus be worthy of heaven.<sup>29</sup> In the Hebrew *Song*, where the voice of the woman is strong, sexual desire and love-making are embraced and celebrated. But in Paul and the Church Fathers, sin and corruption are associated with sexuality and especially the penis, even as the associations with sin (and sinful sexuality) are displaced onto the woman, as she becomes closely identified with the distrusted body.

This negative view of sexuality was not simply a Christian phenomenon. Paul was, of course, a Jew. There was a strain of asceticism—a deep suspicion of sexuality—among Hellenistic Jews in the first centuries, despite the importance Jewish culture placed on marriage

and procreation. The early rabbis taught that an “evil inclination” (the *yetser ha-ra* ) exists in all men, and they identified this specifically with sexual desire.<sup>30</sup> The negative, fearful attitude towards sex appears in a bizarre story in the Talmud about Rabbi Eliezer. He would have sex with his wife only in the dead of night, in total darkness, fully clothed, and as quickly as possible. His wife explained, “when he has intercourse with me, he unveils an inch and veils it again, and appears as if he was driven by a demon” (Babylonian Talmud, Nedarim 20a). This is the same Rabbi Eliezer who taught that a man should not hold his penis when urinating lest he be encouraged to masturbate.<sup>31</sup> Yet another rabbi taught that if a man looks at his wife’s genitals, his child will be born blind; his offspring will be mute if he “kisses ‘that place’” (Nedarim 20b).

Despite the ambivalence about sexuality and the sexed body, rabbinic culture strongly endorsed marriage and rejected celibacy. Paul, however, took another path, exalting celibacy over marriage, anticipating the position of Augustine and other church Fathers.<sup>32</sup> Even when Paul spoke of marriage in Ephesians, chapter 5 (a kind of revision of the *Song of Songs*), as a “great mystery . . . concerning Christ and the Church” (Ephes. 5:32), he made the wife’s subordination to the husband figure the body’s subjection to the spirit: “Wives, submit yourselves unto your own husbands, as unto the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife, even as Christ is the head of the church; and he is the saviour of the body” (Ephes. 5:22-23). While husbands are advised to “cherish” their wives as their own “bodies” and “flesh” (28-29) and though Paul acknowledged the place of conjugal relations in marriage (I Cor. 7:3), the required subjection of the wife echoes the celibate Paul’s more extreme pronouncement about the necessary subjection of the body in 1 Corinthians 9:27, a verse that finds a strong and frequent echo in Donne’s writings: “I keep under my body, and bring it into subjection: lest that by any means, when I have preached to others, I myself should be castaway.”

Paul’s implicit identification of sin and “flesh” with sexuality and the penis was amplified by Augustine, who suggested that original sin is transmitted through the semen in conception, thus turning the

procreation commanded by God in Genesis 1:28 (“Be fruitful, and multiply”) into the generation of death, turning what was a blessing in the Hebrew Bible (and a commandment in rabbinic teaching) into a curse. But the association of male sexual desire and the penis with sin is even more striking in Augustine’s discussion of the immediate effects of the Fall. Whereas before, Adam either had no erection or his “member” was under control of his “will,” as soon as he sinned “lust move[d] those members without the will’s consent.” The erect penis thus becomes the visible sign of “the disobedience of men.”<sup>33</sup>

The deep suspicion of sexuality that runs through Christianity leaves an indelible mark on Donne’s poems—not only in the belief that orgasm shortens man’s life but also in the fear that even married love is a dangerous distraction of the “flesh” that may prove fatal to his spirit and irrevocably separate him from God. Donne’s distrust of sexuality and male sexual desire conflicts with his sense of the goodness of the body, with his sense that erotic love between two human beings is the fullest expression of a human nature made in the image of God, the experience which enables us to be our best, most authentic and integrated selves. It has become something of a commonplace in Donne criticism that Donne’s belief in the interconnection of body and soul and in the holiness of human love expresses a Catholic sacramentalism and a conviction that the Incarnation gives value to all aspects of corporeal existence. A number of critics have argued, quite rightly, that the wit of Donne’s poems turns on the sense of love as sacrament. But as Maureen Sabine has well observed, Donne’s witty use of Christian references (as to Mary Magdalene and Christ) typically “subverts the official effort of Christianity to detach . . . sexuality from that spiritual life which was crucial to salvation.”<sup>34</sup> Neither Christ’s commandment to love our fellow human beings nor Christian notions of the Sacrament are sufficient to account for Donne’s glorification of *sexual* love, so deeply alien to the dominant Pauline ethos of Christianity. Donne not only imagines that the lovers’ resurrected bodies will have genitals—he imagines (*contra* Jerome and Augustine) that they will be useful and *used*. The faith in the holiness and supreme value of sexual love is what I think Donne saw in the *Song*



of *Songs*, finding in the Hebrew Bible (not only the New Testament) a wisdom answering his deepest personal needs. Moreover, as love poetry, the *Song* could offer a fresh alternative to stale Petrarchan conventions as well as to Paul. The *Song* understands desire and the dynamics of love between human beings very differently than the Petrarchan formation, which is fundamentally Pauline and Augustinian, always moving towards a conversion that embraces the spirit while leaving behind the sexual desires of the body. In contrast to the Petrarchan conflicts between body and soul, desiring lover and unattainable mistress, where desire is predicated on lack, stands the utterly different formation of (heterosexual) love in the *Song of Songs*, where desire is mutual, and mutuality kindles rather than kills desire.

The deep ambivalence in Donne about sexuality and the body thus gives eloquent voice to the conflict between the ethos of the Hebrew *Song* and the ethos of Paul, who privileges “spirit” and insists that in the resurrection, what will be resurrected will not be the body of “flesh” but a spiritualized body (I Cor. 15:44, 47-50).<sup>35</sup> Something of this conflict is evident even in “The Relique.” The poem rewrites the biblical scene where Mary Magdalen sees the resurrected Christ and, longing to touch him, is told by Jesus, “*Noli me tangere*,” “Touch me not; for I am not yet ascended to my Father” (John 20:17, AV). Jesus rebukes her desire for bodily connection as inappropriate for the resurrected spiritual state, as if physical touch might prevent him from ascending to heaven. In contrast, Donne’s Christ-like speaker in this 33-line poem desires not just a touch but a full sexual embrace before they ascend to heaven, as if that embrace will not compromise their acceptance into heaven. But the sense of the sacredness of human love that informs “The Relique” is crossed by the cynical, misogynous first lines, with their reference to the supposed promiscuity of women. And buried in the middle stanza of this poem is a hint that love for woman may be idolatry, as Donne’s speaker imagines a time of “mis-devotion” when their relics will be revered: “All women shall adore us, and some men.” Skepticism about the idolatrous reverence of relics and saints raises a question about the legitimacy of his own reverence of this woman. Perhaps this all-consuming passion is “misdevotion.”

Nevertheless, irony and skepticism give way to celebration and eulogy, as the speaker in the last stanza celebrates this woman and their love as a “miracle.” The speaker moves beyond his fear of idolatry. He comes fully to embrace his love for her as something thoroughly and ultimately good—quite the reverse of Donne’s holy sonnet (“Since she whome I lovd hath payd her last debt”), with its insurmountable fear that human ties will “put [God] out” (l. 14). For all the concern about misdevotion and the inconstancy of women, the lover in “The Relique” knows, as surely as the lovers in *The Song of Songs*, that this love is the real thing, the “flame of God” that *is* strong as death and thus just might allow them to meet at the end of time. Separated from his beloved who thus is, as it were, dead to him (hence the past tense of the elegaic last line—“what a miracle shee was”), the speaker never abandons his desire for sexual consummation. That he still longs for a sexual relation—even if he must wait till the resurrection—is a sign, not that he’s hopelessly mired in the body, but that he understands the sacredness of sexual love. What is remarkable about this poem, and what distinguishes it from so many of Donne’s other lyrics, is that the speaker at the end fully embraces his love for her as a miracle, a mystery, something ultimately good. The “bracelet of bright haire about the bone” is the enduring image of their love. Those “whose soule is sense” (“A Valediction forbidding mourning,” l. 14), or who cling to a belief that the sexed body and the spiritual soul are distinct and opposed, will see in this image only an obscene, graphically sexual gesture. But to any “lover, such as wee” (as he calls his true reader in “The Extasie,” l. 73)—that is, to anyone who recognizes the possibility of connecting human and divine, sexual and sacred, no matter how rarely or precariously achieved—that witty yet serious image is, like the *Song of Songs*, and like Donne’s best poetry, at once deeply sexual and profoundly spiritual.<sup>36</sup>

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> George R. Potter and Evelyn M. Simpson, "Introductions," in *The Sermons of John Donne*, 10 vols. (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1962), 1: 88-90. R. C. Bald, *John Donne: A Life* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1970), p. 40; Bald quotes Walton on p. 280.

<sup>2</sup> Recent attention to this poem is seen in M. Thomas Hester, "'Let me love': Reading the Sacred 'Currant' of Donne's Profane Lyrics," in *Sacred and Profane: Secular and Devotional Interplay in Early Modern British Literature*, ed. Helen Wilcox, Richard Todd and Alasdair MacDonald (Amsterdam: VU University Press, 1995), pp. 129-50, esp. 133-36; Dayton Haskin, "On Trying to Make the Record Speak More about Donne's Love Poems," in *John Donne's 'desire of more': The Subject of Anne More Donne in his Poetry*, ed. M. Thomas Hester (Newark: Univ. of Delaware Press, 1996), pp. 39-65; and Maureen Sabine, "No Marriage in Heaven: John Donne, Anne Donne, and the Kingdom Come," in *John Donne's 'desire of more,'* pp. 228-55. A panel discussion at the 1995 annual John Donne Society Conference (Gulfport, MS) on "The Relique" included presentations by M. Thomas Hester, Noralyn Masselink, and Richard Wollman. All quotations of Donne's poetry will be from *The Complete Poetry of John Donne*, ed. John T. Shawcross (Garden City, NJ: Doubleday, 1967).

<sup>3</sup> Anne Ferry, *All in War with Time: Love Poetry of Shakespeare, Donne, Jonson, Marvell* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1975), p. 112. Hester, "'Let me love': Reading the Sacred 'Currant' of Donne's Profane Lyrics."

<sup>4</sup> See Haskin, "On Trying to Make the Record Speak More about Donne's Love Poems," and Sabine, "John Donne, Anne Donne and the Kingdom Come," in *John Donne's 'desire of more.'*

<sup>5</sup> I quote here from the 1917 Jewish Publication Society translation of the Hebrew Masoretic Text (rather than the Douai, Geneva, or AV), since I'm arguing for the relevance of the Hebrew Song. I prefer the 1917 JPS version to the modernized English of the new JPS translation (1982 and 1988).

<sup>6</sup> *The Song of Songs: A New Translation with Introd. and Commentary* [The Anchor Bible], Marvin H. Pope (Garden City: Doubleday, 1977), p. 666.

<sup>7</sup> The emphasis on marriage may be deepened by the Vulgate's "lampades eius lampades ignis atque flammaram," describing the "flashes" of love (JPS), in which the Latin "lampades" could signify not only 'light torches', or 'flames', but also specifically 'wedding torches'.

<sup>8</sup> Ariel and Chana Bloch, in *The Song of Songs: A New Translation with an Introduction and Commentary* (New York: Random House, 1994), suggest provocatively that the lovers in the *Song* are in fact not married, that there is no marriage ceremony described, though they may indeed anticipate marriage (pp. 14, 175).

<sup>9</sup> There is substantial controversy over whether this word contains the name of the God of Israel, "Yah," as suggested by the 1917 Jewish Publication Society

translation. The new JPS translation reads, "A blazing flame." Roland E. Murphy, in *The Song of Songs: A Commentary on the Book of Canticles or The Song of Songs*, ed. S. Dean McBride, Jr. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990), defends the construction "a flame of Yah," noting that its insight is "hermeneutically profound" (p. 104). Ariel and Chana Bloch's translation, however, rejects this interpretation, declaring that "While it is likely that *-yah* derives from Yah, the short form of Yahweh, this ending long ago lost its association with God's name, and became simply a suffix denoting intensity" (p. 213).

<sup>10</sup> The translation of the *Song of Songs* by Pope reads "Its darts are darts of fire, / Its flames ——" (p. 12), and in the commentary he is skeptical of those who see in the final syllable of the Hebrew (*yah*) a short form of the name of God: "The vehement flame seen by modern interpreters in the word *salhebetyah* is not in the LXX [Septuagint] and Vulgate which take the word merely as amplification of the preceding phrase. The alleged occurrence of the Name of God was not exploited by early interpreters" (p. 672).

<sup>11</sup> See J. Cheryl Exum, "A Literary and Structural Analysis of the Song of Songs," *ZAW* 85 (1973): 47-79, for an extended analysis of this pattern.

<sup>12</sup> For example, the Hebrew word *dodim*, which occurs six times in the *Song*, is normally translated as "love" (which might seem chaste or spiritual). But its three other appearances in the Hebrew Bible make it clear that the word is a term for love-making that includes sexual intercourse as well as kisses and caresses (Bloch, pp. 3-4, 37-38).

<sup>13</sup> Bloch, p. 4; this conclusion is anticipated and confirmed by Exum, "A Literary and Structural Analysis."

<sup>14</sup> Murphy, in his *Song of Songs: A Commentary*, notes this "striking idiom" (pp. 82, 131), as do the Blochs, p. 141.

The soul's close tie to the body in the Hebrew Bible is evident in the fact that *nephesh* and the other two Hebrew words for 'soul' are all related to 'breath' and 'breathing.'

<sup>15</sup> Murphy, *The Song of Songs: A Commentary*, pp. 12-14.

<sup>16</sup> See E. Ann Matter, *The Voice of My Beloved: The Song of Songs in Western Medieval Christianity* (Philadelphia: Univ. of Pennsylvania Press, 1990).

<sup>17</sup> On the twelfth century, see Ann W. Astell, *The Song of Songs in the Middle Ages* (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1990), esp. pp. 3-6, 18-20, 31, 35, 178-79.

<sup>18</sup> See St. John of the Cross, *Poems*, with a Translation by Roy Campbell (London: Penguin, 1968), esp. "Songs of the soul in rapture at having arrived at the height of perfection, which is union with God by the road of spiritual negation," "Songs between the soul and the bridegroom," and "Songs of the soul in intimate communication and union with the love of God."

<sup>19</sup> See Daniel Boyarin, *A Radical Jew: Paul and the Politics of Identity* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1994), pp. 1-38, on allegorical, spiritualizing modes of interpretation/reading as the hermeneutic of dualism.

<sup>20</sup> See Susan Haskins, *Mary Magdalen: Myth and Metaphor* (New York: Riverhead Books, 1993), esp. ch. 1 (pp. 1-29); she discusses how in the Gnostic *Gospel of Mary*, Mary Magdalen is the “companion” of Christ—“more correctly translated as ‘partner’ or ‘consort,’ a woman with whom a man has had sexual intercourse” (p. 37).

<sup>21</sup> *Encyclopedia Judaica*, 16 vols. (Jerusalem: Keter Publishing, 1971), 15:146. See Exum, “A Literary and Structural Analysis,” on the impossibility of determining whether the man or the woman is the speaker of some lines in the poem. Marcia Falk observes that “the voices do not conform to masculine and feminine stereotypes”: *Love Lyrics from the Bible: The Song of Songs (A New Translation)* (San Francisco: Harper, 1990), p. xxi. The close interconnection between the man and woman may even be signalled by her epithet “the Shulamite” which Murphy suggests may involve “deliberate wordplay on the name ‘Solomon’” (p. 85).

<sup>22</sup> See Anthony Low, *The Reinvention of Love: Poetry, politics, and culture from Sidney to Milton* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1993), pp. 31-64.

<sup>23</sup> It has been frequently suggested that the author of the *Song* was a woman. See Murphy, *Song of Songs: A Commentary*, p. 70; Phyllis Tribble, *God the the Rhetoric of Sexuality* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1978), p. 145.

<sup>24</sup> *Encyclopedia Judaica*, 15:144.

<sup>25</sup> See Bloch, *The Song of Songs*, “Introduction,” pp. 14, 24. For a fuller discussion of the multiple-entendres in the poem, see Exum, “A Literary and Structural Analysis of the Song of Songs.”

<sup>26</sup> Chana and Ariel Bloch describe *The Songs of Songs* as expressing “the transforming experience of falling in love” (*Song of Songs*, “Intro.”, p. 7) and Robert Alter in his “Afterward” remarks how in this biblical poem, “love provides access to a kind of divinity” (Bloch, p. 131)—remarks evocative of Donne’s poetry as well.

<sup>27</sup> I align myself with those who see structural unity in the *Song of Songs* and thus argue that it is the work of a single poet: Exum, “A Literary and Structural Analysis of the Song of Songs”; William H. Shea, “The Chiastic Structure of the Song of Songs,” *ZAW*, 92 (1980): 379-96; and Roland E. Murphy, “The Unity of the Song of Songs,” *VT*, 29 (1979): 436-43.

<sup>28</sup> See Boyarin, *Radical Jew*, esp. pp. 57-85.

<sup>29</sup> See Caroline Walker Bynum, *The Resurrection of the Body in Western Christianity, 200-1336* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1995), Part I (pp. 1-114), esp. pp. 90-91, 100.

<sup>30</sup> For some rabbis the “evil inclination” had both good and evil potential, but for others was essentially dangerous. On the early rabbinic idea of the “evil inclination,” see David Biale, *Eros and the Jews: From Biblical Israel to Contemporary America* (New York: Basic Books 1992), pp. 43-48, and Daniel Boyarin, *Carnal Israel: Reading Sex in Talmudic Culture* (Berkeley: Univ. of

California Press, 1993), ch. 2, pp. 61-76. Biale places more emphasis on the ascetic pole of rabbinic ambivalence about sexuality in the Talmud, where Boyarin emphasizes that sexuality for the rabbis was essentially a creative force of life, despite destructive potentials. The late second-century Hellenistic Jewish text, *The Testament of the Twelve Patriarchs*, describes each human being inhabited by asexual "good spirit" and an "evil spirit," identified with sexuality (see Boyarin, *Radical Jew*, p. 159).

<sup>31</sup> See Biale, *Eros and the Jews*, p. 56. *Seder Nashim*, vol. III, in *The Babylonian Talmud*, ed. Rabbi I. Epstein, 18 vols. (London: Soncino Press, 1935-48).

<sup>32</sup> See Boyarin's convincing argument in *Radical Jew*.

<sup>33</sup> Relevant passages from Augustine's *City of God*, trans. Marcus Dods, 2 vols. (New York: Hafner Publishing Co., 1948), include Bk. 13, ch.1-3, 13-15 (1:521-24, 534-36); Bk. 14, ch. 11-13, 17-18, 24 (2:22-28, 32-34, 41-43). See discussions of Augustine in Elaine Pagels, *Adam, Eve, and the Serpent* (New York: Random House, 1988), ch. 6; Peter Brown, *The Body and Society: Men, Women, and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1988), ch. 19 (pp. 387-427), and Epilogue (pp. 428-47, esp. 426, 438); and Peter Gorday's discussion of Augustine's interpretation of Romans 7:1-25 and 8:1-17, in *Principles of Patristic Exegesis: Romans 9-11 in Origen, John Chrysostom, and Augustine*, Studies in the Bible and Early Christianity, vol. 4 (New York: Edwin Mellen, 1983), 162-65, 174-75.

<sup>34</sup> On the idea of love as sacramental, see esp. M. Thomas Hester, "'this cannot be said': A Preface to the Reader of Donne's Lyrics," *Christianity and Literature* 39 (1990): 365-85; Hester, "'Let me love': Reading the Sacred 'Currant' of Donne's Profane Lyrics"; Theresa DiPasquale, "Ambivalent Mourning: Sacramentality, Idolatry, and Gender in 'Since she whome I lovd hath payd her last debt'," *John Donne Journal* 10 (1991): 45-56; Achsah Guibbory, "Donne, Milton, and Holy Sex," *Milton Studies* 32, ed. Albert C. Labriola (Pittsburgh: Univ. of Pittsburgh Press, 1996): 3-21; and Guibbory, "Fear of 'loving more': Death and the Loss of Sacramental Love," in *John Donne's 'desire of more,'* pp. 204-27. See Maureen Sabine's comment on Donne's subversive use of Christian references, in "John Donne, Anne Donne, and the Kingdom Come," in *John Donne's 'desire of more,'* p. 232.

<sup>35</sup> Boyarin, *Radical Jew*, suggests convincingly that Paul implicitly distinguishes between a "physical body and a spiritual body" (p. 62), the "physical body" being the body of flesh, the body with sexuality. Paul seems to suggest that it's a spiritual body (without the "flesh" of sexuality) that will be resurrected (1 Cor. 15: 42-50).

<sup>36</sup> An earlier version of this paper was delivered as the presidential address at the eleventh annual John Donne Conference. This essay is dedicated to the memory of Carol Kyle.