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Seamus Heaney and John Donne: An Echo of "The Ecstasy"

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Critics have long noted that Seamus Heaney's "Glanmore Sonnet X" from *Field Work* (London: Ebenezer Bayless & Sons, Ltd., 1979 [p. 42]) gains considerable power by placing the wedding night it celebrates into the context of Irish Legend and Renaissance poetry and drama by referring to Diarmuid and Grainne and Lorenzo and Jessica from *The Merchant of Venice* as well as borrowing words and phrases from Dante and Sir Thomas Wyatt.[1] There is another, as yet unreported allusion to English Renaissance love poetry in the poem, for the narrator's initial description of himself and the woman who appears in the poem recalls a striking passage in John Donne's poem "The Ecstasy." Heaney's narrator first tells us that he has

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[1]Deborah McLoughlin called attention to the significance of the references to Irish myth, Shakespeare and Wyatt in her article "'An Ear to the Line': Modes of Receptivity in Seamus Heaney's 'Glanmore Sonnets'," *PLL*, 25 (1989): 214-215; Helen Vendler reflects her concern with Irish myth and Shakespeare in Seamus Heaney (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998), pp. 67-68 while Neil Corcoran, in *Seamus Heaney* (London: Faber and Faber, 1986), pp. 143, 145, 148, and Daniel Tobin, in *Passage to the Center* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1999) pp. 155, 161, both discuss the centrality of Wyatt's "They Flee From Me" to our understanding of the poem. No one has noted the likeness to Donne in the opening lines.

dreamed of himself and his wife, sleeping on a "turf bank." Later, he says that they were "darkly asperged and censed, laid out / like breathing effigies on a raised ground" (7-8). The placement of the lovers on a bank and the description of their resemblance to funereal effigies seems meant to recall the opening passage of Donne's poem where the poet-narrator describes himself and his lover entranced with one another, hands locked, lying beside a violet upon a bank, their souls joined outside their bodies in an ecstatic experience. Donne's speaker reveals that, all day long the pair had lain, like sepulchral statues" upon a bank beside a violet (18), insisting that he and his beloved are united in spirit. This unity supports the speaker's plea for consummation of their romance in the real world since he argues that they will be unchanged when they return to their bodies and therefore have an obligation to reveal their perfect love to the world. By inviting us to visualize the lovers similarly lying upon a bank, Heaney may suggest that the pair had believed that the consummation which is recalled in the rest of the poem was based upon a comparable spiritual unity. Later, the speaker tells us that in his dream, this scene gave way to a vision of his wedding night in which he sees his wife entering their room to offer a kiss as the prelude to the consummation of their marriage, a kiss which is described as a "covenant of flesh," at once "lovely and painful," providing them with a respite from the harsh realities around them. This covenant contrasts with the spiritual unity in Donne's poem inasmuch as the lovers seem to transcend their separateness only momentarily. Heaney, rather than promising the transcendent union of spirit that Donne offered in "The Ecstasy," rather suggests that these lovers, find a "respite" from isolation and from the world around them. It is, I think, clear that Heaney intends that the reader recognize this allusion, for it heightens our awareness of the distinction that that sets the dreamlike unity of lines 1-8 apart from the covenant fulfilled in the real world at the conclusion of

the sonnet, because it underscores our awareness of the less idealistic point of view in his poem.

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