

Nicholas Slagter

ENG 343

Dr. Faber

13 April 2017

Sacrificial Sonnet: Consoling Donne's Dislike for Petrarchan Distance

John Donne's *Holy Sonnets*, as Gary Kuchar notes, generally revolve around the theme that repentance requires one to reduce oneself to nothingness, a sacrifice of all autonomy (537). The oft-discussed "Batter my heart" is no exception to this, and even pushes this concept further by suggesting that true self-sacrifice is impossible unless God, paradoxically, intervenes in a forceful manner. The sonnet not only recognizes that this must happen, but also provides the opportunity for Donne to allow such intervention to happen. The sonnet form is a way in which Donne can attempt to achieve this self-sacrifice; it acts as a poetic vehicle toward salvation. Through this, Donne is able to draw on Petrarchan notions of the lover-beloved relationship, challenge its idealism, and bring into focus a picture of what true divine love looks like. The speaker, evidently, is unsuccessful, as the sonnet lacks a resolution. The speaker is left with an unanswered call to God. He leaves the sonnet as unmoved as he began. As despairing as this sounds for Donne, he was not entirely unsuccessful in capturing an image of God's forceful intervention. The sonnet itself stands in for the speaker as the bodily frame that endures God's "force" ("Batter my heart" 3) that the speaker wishes to experience.

*Eros*, according to Achsah Guibbory, was the "driving force of life" for Donne (133). In his *Songs and Sonnets*, the voices that sound most fulfilled are those who embrace their desire for the beloved, and are embraced in return (138). Much of Donne's poetry, including his sonnets, depicts an animosity toward separation between two lovers, and part of Donne's poetic

work is to find a real connection within the poetry itself (Targoff 49-50). Donne wants to capture the state of bliss he feels when the love is mutually reciprocated, and it is in the sonnets that he attempts to translate this from erotic love between two lovers to divine love between God and believer (Targoff 49-50).

The move to divine love in the *Holy Sonnets* is accompanied by a shift in poetic form for Donne. From the *Songs and Sonnets*—a set of poems containing no sonnets—Donne moved to the *Holy Sonnets* in which the poems are exclusively in sonnet form. John Stachniewski notes that this shift is “in the direction of conservatism” (686). It is a form that forces him to be disciplined in order to contain his feelings of desperation, his uncertain salvation. If Donne is asking to be imprisoned by God in order to feel His love, as he argues in “Batter my heart,” then the sonnet is an appropriate form in which to express this. The sonnet form also allows Donne to draw on a rich tradition that largely directs his complex questions regarding salvation toward a poetic resolution, and as Ramie Targoff argues, the content would not unfold the same way had they been framed in a different form (107). Donne’s desire to feel God’s divine love, when placed within the sonnet, cannot help but call on Petrarchan ideals of the lover-beloved relationship.

The traditional Petrarchan relationship depicts a speaker as a lover who idealizes his beloved. The beloved remains distant and aloof, neglecting to reciprocate the love. The lover in turn, due to his idealization of the beloved, is unable to act on his desire (Ruffo-Fiore 320). Such a tradition resembles much of Donne’s own thinking in many of his love poems, and though Donne makes use of this Petrarchan tradition in the sonnets, he does not simply imitate it; rather, he utilizes this tradition to suit his particular circumstance (Ruffo-Fiore 327). In the case of “Batter my heart,” the underlying circumstance is Donne’s inability to accept God: “I . . . /

Labour to admit you” (5-6). This inability creates a distance between him and God, which, as has been mentioned above, is unbearable for Donne. The only way to overcome this, then, is to ask God to forcibly break down that distance.

Donne was aware of the Petrarchan tendency to wholly focus on the beloved in an ideal sense (Kuchar 543). The sonnet begins with an understanding that the speaker is unable as the lover to overcome this tendency, and therefore, must enlist God’s aid. The speaker calls on God to act as the lover rather than a distant ideal:

Batter my heart, three person’d God, for you  
 As yet but knock, breathe, shine, and seek to mend;  
 That I may rise, and stand, o’erthrow me, and bend  
 Your force, to break, blow, burn and make me new. (1-4)

The speaker is frustrated that God refuses to do more than “knock, breathe, shine” so that he may be “mend[ed]” (2). For the speaker, this mending is not enough, and wishes to have God “break, blow, burn” and make him entirely “new” (4). Targoff draws attention to the biblical connotations with each set of verbs in lines two and four. The first set refers to “gentle moments of divine intervention” (Targoff 122), while the following three refer to “decidedly less positive moments in scripture” (Targoff 122). The strong alliteration in the second list emphasizes the “force” (4) by which the speaker wants to be attacked. The metaphors are largely militaristic, which is reminiscent of the Petrarchan beloved who is besieged by her lover and denies his entry (Ruffo-Fiore 322). Targoff notes that the first word of the poem, “batter,” immediately evokes this sense. In the seventeenth century, the word could mean to beat with a weapon, or to break down a fortified wall (Targoff 121). Both senses are at play, and it sets up the context for metaphors of violence to follow.

What is important to note is the reversal of roles. The speaker is asking God to treat him as the beloved by depicting himself as the fortified lady who scorns her lover's advances. The first quatrain explains that God has not used sufficient force to overcome these barriers, and the following quatrain serves to make more explicit this reversal of roles:

I, like an usurped town, to another due,  
 Labour to admit you, but oh, to no end,  
 Reason your viceroy in me, me should defend,  
 But is captiv'd, and proves weak or untrue. (5-8)

The second quatrain directly depicts the speaker as a "usurped town," and as a result, is incapable of granting God entry. Like the metaphors traditionally attributed to the Petrarchan beloved, the speaker uses metaphors of war and conquest to describe his current state. His usurper, like the Petrarchan lady's husband, prevents the speaker from fully experiencing God. Even his reason, as the "viceroy" of his soul, cannot speak on his behalf; rather, it too has been captured and restrained, lacking the strength to break free.

The octave depicts the speaker as the aloof lover, though, as line nine clarifies, he truly loves God and desires a real connection with Him. This is where Donne attempts to go beyond the Petrarchan tradition. The speaker, depicted as the beloved, wants a real connection with God, the lover, and it is God who has the power to break down the traditional barrier of idealism. The problem for Donne by the end of the octave is the need for a *volta*, a resolution for the problem he has posed. John Fuller argues that Donne rarely feels the need for a *volta*, preferring to take his sonnets in gradual steps (23). Targoff, similarly, notes that Donne does not follow the conventional structure of the sonnet as he avoids one definitive turn at line nine in favour of multiple turns progressing throughout the poem (110); however, this sonnet seems to be pining

for a definitive turn toward a resolution. The octave has set up a salvation issue that directly asks God to intervene on the speaker's behalf. Some anxiety for the resolution is apparent by the first words of lines eight to ten. Each of these lines, surrounding the traditional turn at line nine, begins with either "But" or "Yet," both being typical words that signal the turn in a sonnet. Donne seems to be trying to cue the turn, with some uncertainty about whether it will make its appearance.

As Donne realizes that the turn has not occurred as resolutely at line nine as he has been building toward—God remains distant despite his invocations—Donne makes two notable stylistic shifts in the sestet in an attempt to bring about this resolution more clearly. The first is his shift from a Petrarchan rhyme scheme in the octave (abbaabba) to a Shakespearean rhyme scheme in the sestet (cdcdde), which is true in most of Donne's sonnets. According to Stephen Burt and David Mikics, the effect of this is a "virtuosic" octave followed by an "emphatic" sestet (76-77), and in this particular sonnet, it renders a sense of urgency:

Yet dearly I love you, and would be lov'd fain,  
 But am betroth'd unto your enemy,  
 Divorce me, untie, or break that knot again,  
 Take me to you, imprison me, for I  
 Except you enthrall me, never shall be free,  
 Nor ever chaste, except you ravish me. (9-14)

The octave is tightly enclosed by only two strong rhymes, as it sets up the reversal of roles, asking God to act the forceful lover and close the distance of Petrarchan idealism. The sestet, however, as Donne finds it difficult to resolve this, uses the Shakespearean sestet as a new form

in which to cue the resolution. The Shakespearean sestet offers a helpful function for Donne, as it allows him to delay the need for a resolution to the final rhyming couplet (Fuller 15-16).

The second stylistic shift in the sestet is his use of metaphors, moving from militaristic to erotic (Targoff 122). The introduction to the sestet directly calls on notions of love between the speaker and God, and moves into metaphors of marriage: he is “betrothed” to God’s “enemy,” and calls on God to “divorce” this union so as to enable a forced union with the speaker. The sestet crescendos toward the speaker’s final call: “Nor ever chaste, except you ravish me” (14). The final line makes the sexual tone of the sestet undeniable, and even, as Targoff explains, adds a sexual edge to the militaristic metaphors in the octave. The phrase “labour to admit you” (6) no longer only suggests a sexual connotation, but is now inherently part of the meaning (Targoff 123). Donne is mounting the intensity of his metaphors in the sestet from militaristic to increasingly explicit sexual metaphors out of his anxiety to bring this sonnet to the resolution he seeks, and if Donne believes that images of “divine rape” (Stachniewski 689) may spur God toward direct action, then he will utilize this.

The entire poem in this sense has been an increasingly urgent invocation to God, asking him to break the Petrarchan distance between lover and the beloved, and to make a real connection. Part of the lyrical nature of the sonnet is characterized by the speaker’s voice addressing someone in a personal manner, and constantly waiting for some kind of response. The speaker is “interdependent,” Ruf notes; the “voice interacts” with the addressee of the sonnet (303-04), or in the case of “Batter my heart,” desperately tries to interact. Of course, by the time the poem draws to its ending rhyming couplet, this interaction has not happened for the speaker: “Except you enthrall me, never shall be free, / Nor ever chaste, unless you ravish me” (13-14). Though it is witty, a traditional function of the rhyming couplet in Shakespearean sonnets, the

long-delayed turn does little more than summarize the sonnet's progression. Unless God enslaves him, he cannot be free, and, to take it further, he could not be chaste unless God sexually assaulted him. The metaphors map nicely onto the militaristic octave and sexual sestet, but only leave the speaker much where he started at line one with "Batter my heart, three person'd God."

It appears as though the sonnet lacks its desired resolution; both the speaker and the sonnet form itself call for a successful turn of some sort, but it is denied any such occurrence. Frederick J. Ruf clarifies his statement about the lyric voice being "interdependent," as he states that the addressee must necessarily remain absent. The speaker remains by him or herself (306). This reality is made more potent within the context of the sonnet as Donne positions the speaker in the Petrarchan tradition, but attempts to invert his role from lover to beloved. God, as the necessarily absent figure, is required by the speaker to become an active character, rendering the speaker a passive subject. This, of course, is impossible, as the speaker is required to actively speak the poem. Targoff highlights this tension at the beginning of the poem: "This stance of total passivity contrasts powerfully with the forcefulness of his voice—the first quatrain of this sonnet bombards its reader with no fewer than fourteen verbs" (120). It is only logical that the poem concludes without reaching the resolution that the speaker demands. Not only this, but it also doubles the distance between Donne and God. Donne, accepting that he cannot transcend the Petrarchan distance of idealism, calls on God to do this instead. He attempts to depict himself as the passive object, the aloof beloved who neglects the attempt. But God, as the addressee of the lyric, is also unable to affect change on the speaker, as he remains outside of the spoken lyric. Both, then, inhabit a space that prohibits them from making any real resolution to Donne's problem.

Donne's "Batter my heart," though the speaker is unable to experience the resolution he requires, does not fail to exhibit the kind of action he wishes to see in God. The sonnet itself is given a body that endures the "batter[ing]" (1) and "ravish[ing]" (14) it calls for. In this way, the sonnets "are intended to anatomize faith" (Coles 919). Targoff argues that part of Donne's genius is his ability to give voice to the poem itself (129). "I am a little world made cunningly" most closely resembles this, acting as Donne's created world. The same function can be seen at work in "Batter my heart." The sonnet, as Donne's own creation, is given a body, just as God has created his. The analogous connection between God-Donne and Donne-sonnet is not unlike Donne's understanding of the importance of sex, as mentioned above, and is in many ways interconnected with it. Sex as a transcendent experience is a way in which Donne can get a real taste of God's divine love (Guibbory 145). The real connection Donne is able to experience with a lover gives him a fuller sense of God's love that, as the *Holy Sonnets* reveal, often feels distant in a Petrarchan sense. So, too, the sonnet form enables Donne to make a real connection that simulates what he wishes to experience from God, and sexual imagery is an important function in "Batter my heart" that makes this work.

Ralph Norman argues that erotic symbols have their own "sensory quality," becoming objects of arousal themselves (241). The metaphors en flesh the sexual component of the sonnet's body, and becomes the point of contact that Donne increasingly drives toward, building the tension within the sonnet to the last line. Irresolute sexual tension in the *Songs and Sonnets* often brings Donne to neglect the value of the beloved (Guibbory 138), but the sonnet's interaction with this tension gives Donne another medium through which to actualize a real connection to God. Though Donne is unable to feel God's intervention as he calls for it in the sonnet, the sonnet itself, as it is given a voice, experiences this on Donne's behalf. The sonnet seems to be

attempting “to burst out of the constricting sonnet form” (Stachniewski 690). As soon as the sonnet utters the trochee “Batter,” conflicting with the expected iambic rhythm, this tension is at play, and will continuously increase as the sonnet progresses. Nearly half of the lines throughout the sonnet struggle to remain within ten syllables, requiring the use of elision to avoid the eleventh syllable from interrupting the rhythm. The turn in metaphors from militaristic to sexual at line nine breaks from the Petrarchan rhyme scheme, which acts as part of the sonnet’s step away from the Petrarchan idealism to which it is “betroth’d” (10). And as the sonnet increases its intensity, begging its creator to “divorce” (11) it from this idealism, it runs itself to its end without coming to the resolution that the sonnet form requires. In Donne’s failure to completely adhere to the tight form of the sonnet, demonstrating his reluctance to completely give in to God’s will, the sonnet also demonstrates the very instance in which a God-figure enacts what is being called for. Donne’s failure is the sonnet’s success.

The sonnet takes on a Christ-like form through its incarnation of Donne’s—and humanity’s—plight in the world: humans cannot separate themselves from the “enemy” (10) on their own. As a result of this inability, humanity deserves to be battered and ravished. Christ’s incarnate body, however, fulfills this purpose so that believers in Christ are exempt from such an experience. The sonnet acts analogously by offering its own body in Donne’s stead. It voices Donne’s frustration that he cannot act rightly on his own; he is unable to bring himself to feel a real connection with God. For Donne, at least being battered and ravished would deliver some sense of connection, no matter how grotesque; however, this cannot be, as Christ’s death would have been in vain. Donne and all other believers are no longer meant to experience such treatment. The sonnet, like Christ, steps in Donne’s place, and can offer him some consolation.

Though he continues to feel God's seemingly Petrarchan absence, this sonnet, and his poetry more generally, gives him a place in which this connection can be partially realized.

## Works Cited

- Burt, Stephen, and David Mikics. *The Art of the Sonnet*. Harvard University Press, 2010.
- Coles, Kimberly Anne. "The Matter of Belief in John Donne's *Holy Sonnets*." *Renaissance Quarterly*, vol. 68, no. 3, Fall2015, pp. 899-931. EBSCOhost,
- Donne, John. "Batter my heart." *The Broadview Anthology of Seventeenth-Century Verse and Prose*, edited by Alan Rudrum, et al. Peterborough: Broadview, 2000. 124.
- Fuller, John. *The Sonnet*, edited by John D. Jump. London: Methuen and Co., 1972.
- Guibbory, Achsah. "Erotic Poetry." *The Cambridge Companion to John Donne*, edited by Achsah Guibbory, Cambridge University Press, 2006, pp. 133- 47.
- Kucher, Gary. "Petrarchism and Repentance in John Donne's *Holy Sonnets*." *Modern Philology*, vol. 105, no. 3, 2008, pp. 535–569. [www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/591260](http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/591260).
- Norman, Ralph. "Sexual Symbolism, Religious Language and the Ambiguity of the Spirit: Associative Themes in Anglican Poetry and Philosophy." *Theology & Sexuality: The Journal of the Institute for the Study of Christianity & Sexuality*, vol. 13, no. 3, 2007, pp. 233-56. EBSCOhost, doi:10.1177/1355835807078258.
- Ruf, Frederick J. "Lyric Autobiography: John Donne's *Holy Sonnets*." *The Harvard Theological Review*, vol. 86, no. 3, 1993, pp. 293–307. [www.jstor.org/stable/1510012](http://www.jstor.org/stable/1510012).
- Ruffo-Fiore, Silvia. "The Unwanted Heart in Petrarch and Donne." *Comparative Literature*, vol. 24, no. 4, 1972, pp. 319–327. [www.jstor.org/stable/1769459](http://www.jstor.org/stable/1769459).
- Stachniewski, John. "John Donne: The Despair of the 'Holy Sonnets.'" *ELH*, vol. 48, no. 4, 1981, pp. 677–705. [www.jstor.org/stable/2872957](http://www.jstor.org/stable/2872957).
- Targoff, Ramie. *John Donne, Body and Soul*. University of Chicago Press, 2008.