



Interrogating God: Donne's Holy Sonnets and their religious contexts

Annie Peppiatt

"All theology is done in a context."¹ Donne's writing, as both preacher and poet, appears acutely conscious of its tempestuous political and religious contexts, engaging with the theological debates of the Reformation and Counter-Reformation era. The inflamed exchange of theological thought between England and continental Europe combined with the recent translation of the Bible into English provided a radically new context of personal theological contemplation. Donne's own conversion, or perhaps apostasy, from Catholicism to the Anglican Church may have been 'attended by profound doubts and existential crisis',² expressed through the 'stylistic disturbances'³ of his metaphysical poetry. Though not necessarily autobiographical, the many speakers of Donne's Holy Sonnets voice different questions about the Church, sin, and salvation with often controversial non-conformity. The relative freedom of expression provided by the protection of the limited intimate audience of manuscripts and elaborate, often humorous use of conceits allowed Donne to test convictions with startling emotional and intellectual nerve. Utilising the popular Petrarchan sonnet form and threefold structure of religious meditation, it is Donne's subversion of these conventions that enables his poetry to pose unconventional religious ideas. Holy Sonnets 9 ('If poisonous minerals...'), 17 (Since she whom I loved...'), and 18 (Show me, dear Christ...')⁴ may all be interpreted as dyadic dialogues between the speakers and God. Yet, ultimately, the inevitable silence of God means there can be no tête-à-tête; the poems' questions can only be left unanswered.

Meditation was encouraged by both Catholics and Protestants as a method of 'diligent and forcible application of understanding'⁵ to achieve and solidify religious convictions. The 4-4-6

¹ David Bagchi and David C. Steinmetz, 'Introduction: the scope of Reformation Theology', *The Cambridge Companion to Reformation Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), p3.

² Steven Greenblatt et al., 'John Donne', ed. Steven Greenblatt, *The Norton Anthology of English Literature, Tenth Edition, Volume B: The Sixteenth Century and the Early Seventeenth Century* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2018), p906.

³ Judith Scherer Herz, 'Reading and re-reading Donne's poetry', ed. Achsah Guibbory, *The Cambridge Companion to John Donne* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), p105.

⁴ John Donne, 'Holy Sonnets', ed. Steven Greenblatt, *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, pp962-964.; Although the Holy Sonnets do not have a confirmed order, this numbering is consistent with the traditional numbering of Sir Herbert Grierson's edition. Hereafter sonnets will be referenced in-text.

⁵ Louis L. Martz, *The Poetry of Meditation*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1962), 2nd ed., p14.

division of the Petrarchan sonnet accommodates the three-stage meditative practice of a) prelude, a composition of place to imagine 'theological issues as part of a concrete scene',⁶ b) meditation on one's own sin and salvation, and c) colloquy, a dialogue with God resulting in intense devotion and conviction. However, Donne manipulates both the Petrarchan structure and the expectations of meditation to present the religious turmoil of the period. Holy Sonnet 18 may portray a frustrated attempt at meditation. Instead of beginning with his own 'concrete scene', the speaker strives for a vision, breaking the expected iambic pentameter with 'Show me' (line 1), an imperative trochaic foot that demands God's attention and response. This expresses the desire of the speaker for revelation of the "true" Church. Line 2 also begins with the firm stress of 'What!', an exclamation that could simulate the joy of religious epiphany, but that potential clarity is undermined by further questioning. Donne uses irregularity in iambic pentameter to reveal core elements of religious debate in the Reformation era. The speaker questions whether the Church is 'now new, now outwore?' (line 6), presenting the contemporary justification for Roman Catholic tradition as a continuum from the life of Christ against the new enlightenment of the Reformation. The double stress on 'self-truth' (line 6) emphasises the personal within the complex public operation of religion. In a culture where personal confessional allegiance was politicised and dangerous, the speaker investigates their individual identity, their 'self-truth', within this. This may be expressing Donne's own grappling with denominational uncertainty, pulled between his Catholic heritage and 'now new' Protestant England. Preaching that Christ 'suffered for my soule',⁷ salvation was not merely a political concern for Donne, but a personal one.

The conceit of the Church as Christ's bride is developed to present the Reformation's conflicting denominations. This established metaphor assumes the Biblical knowledge of Donne's contemporary audience: 'Christ loved the church'⁸ like a bride, as 'bright and pure'⁹ as the vision the speaker seeks. Paul, and accordingly God, feels 'a divine jealousy' for the Church, 'since I betrothed you to one husband, to present you as a pure virgin to Christ'.¹⁰ However, this virginal Church is not found by the speaker. Instead, she may be 'richly painted' (line 3), an adorned prostitute that implicitly critiques the ornamented Catholic Church in which salvation is bought by deeds and offerings. Or, she is 'robbed and tore' (line 3) like the Lutheran churches of Germany were dispossessed of their supposedly idolatrous art and altars. A reader may expect this dichotomy of Reformation ideology to be resolved

⁶ Martz, p30.

⁷ John Donne, 'Sermon 3', ed. David Colclough, *The Oxford Edition of the Sermons of John Donne, Volume 3: Sermons Preached at the Court of Charles I* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), p52.

⁸ Ephesians 5:27

⁹ Revelation 19:8

¹⁰ Corinthians 2:11

through the progress of the poem. Yet, the rhyme scheme shifts from a Petrarchan octave to a Spenserian sestet, and the volta is displaced to line 11. This dominating occupation of poetic structure by rhetorical questioning leaves little room for resolution. The iambic pentameter of line 11 is disrupted with a caesura, ending with a bacchius foot – ‘to *our sights*’ (line 11, emphasis added) – switching from a request for personal revelation to shared revelation, showing the importance of and anxiety around religious conviction as a foundation of early modern English society. ‘Betray, kind husband’ (line 11) offers a possibly ironic interpretation of the Biblical analogy as the conceit is continued: the wife is betrayed ‘When she is embraced and open to most men’ (line 14). The sexually scandalous connotations of ‘the Church as Christ’s prostituted spouse’ or ‘Christ himself as a complaisant cuckold’¹¹ may simply be a humorous manipulation of a well-known metaphor by a writer who appears to relish stretching ‘a figure of speech to the farthest stage to which ingenuity can carry it’.¹² Nonetheless, Donne may be presenting the unavailing task of unifying the divided European Christian community, arguing that ‘when you descend to satisfie all men in your own religion [...] you prostitute your self and your understanding’.¹³ Christ’s ‘dove’ (line 12; Song of Solomon 5:2) ‘sought him, but found him not; I called him, but he gave no answer’.¹⁴ The power of the speaker’s direct address to God is in the silence with which it is met – God ‘gave no answer’, expressing the extent of religious uncertainty at the time.

Ironic adaptation of Biblical narrative is exaggerated by the unconventional rhythm of the question ‘Doth she, and did she, and shall she evermore | On one, on seven, or on no hill appear?’ (lines 7-8). The stressed ‘Doth’, ‘did’, and ‘shall’ parallel the Bible’s assertion of the God ‘who is and who was and who is to come’,¹⁵ juxtaposing the uncertain status of the Church with the confident surety of the Biblical language the poetry evokes. Frustrating the composition of place required by meditative convention, the speaker asks which hills the Church may be founded on. The seven hills are likely reference to the seven hills of Rome, representing the Roman Catholic Church. Steven Greenblatt suggests that the one hill is Mount Moriah, the mountain of the sacrifice of Isaac and Solomon’s temple, and that the no hill is the Presbyterian Church of Geneva.¹⁶ Mount Moriah may represent the Judaic covenant, an alternative religious mode, or the negation of sacrifice through salvation by faith to represent Arminian theology. Alternatively, the one hill may be the Mount of Olives,

¹¹ Alison Shell and Arnold Hunt, ‘Donne’s religious world’, ed. Achsah Guibbory, *The Cambridge Companion to John Donne*, p80.

¹² T. S. Eliot, quoted in Martz, p2.

¹³ John Donne, *Letters to Severall Persons of Honour (1651)* (New York: Georg Olms Verlag, 1974), p103.

¹⁴ Song of Solomon 5:6

¹⁵ Revelation 1:8

¹⁶ Greenblatt et al., ed. Steven Greenblatt, *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, p964.

towering over Gethsemane, or Mount Golgotha, the site of the crucifixion, both conjuring the suffering of Christ, which may allude to Protestant beliefs. The imagery of 'no hill' may, instead of depicting the Presbyterian Church, be posing more radical ideas – that the true incarnation of the Church has not yet been revealed. Donne would likely have known some scriptural justification for the argument that neither denominations suffice. Perhaps the speaker feels that the tumultuous Reformation era was 'the hour [...] when neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem will you worship the Father',¹⁷ judging the factional, violent churches as 'lewd whoring, on the hills' and asking 'How long will it be before' God's virginal bride is given clarity and 'made clean?'¹⁸ Instead of finding resolution in denominational allegiance, the speaker may, like Donne, identify with 'convictions broader than what might be attributed to either Germany or Rome'.¹⁹ Donne's irenic approach to denominational conflict and his broader conflation of erotic love and spiritual devotion throughout his poetry may support the theology that although 'the hills be removed, but my steadfast love shall not depart from you',²⁰ emphasising the significance of personal conviction and connection over doctrine.

Similarly, Holy Sonnet 9 also portrays a speaker directly questioning God and interrogating the theological ideas of Donne's society. But rather than questioning the correct method of salvation, the radical speaker risks blasphemy by questioning the necessity of salvation itself. Donne likewise works within a framework of Biblical imagery recognisable to his audience, alluding to 'that tree | Whose fruit threw death on else-immortal us' (lines 1-2). This tree is the Tree of Knowledge, whose fruit humanity ate, transgressing God's commandment. Yet, the speaker subverts the expected Biblical paradigm by assigning agency to the tree's fruit, not mankind – it is the fruit that 'threw death', placing responsibility for the Fall on the tree, and by extension on God's design, not on human action. The phrase 'else-immortal us' conveys reproach to the tree, rather than the allied 'us'. As in Holy Sonnet 18, the poem's meter becomes most meaningful when it is broken. The tone of accusation culminates in the speaker's key question, highlighted with a break in iambic pentameter – 'why should I be' (line 4) damned? The question is reiterated with the succeeding trochaic foot demanding 'Why' (line 5)? Donne structures the sonnet's argument with precise rhetorical organisation reminiscent of Donne's legal education. For example, this is shown in the diversion from meter in line 6, broken with a caesura, against which are balanced the two standards of sin, and so revealing the speaker's sense of the hypocrisy of contemporary

¹⁷ John 4:21

¹⁸ Jeremiah 13:27

¹⁹ Jonathan F. S. Post, 'Donne's life: a sketch', ed. Achsah Guibbory, *The Cambridge Companion to John Donne*, p14.

²⁰ Isaiah 54:10

Christian theology. Judith Scherer Herz suggests that Donne's poem 'The Flea' is composed like 'both a lawyer's brief and a vividly imagined little play';²¹ arguably, this sonnet may be read with a similar perspective. Throughout the first octave, the speaker builds up an argument against damnation – perhaps more specifically against the dominant Calvinist belief in double predestination, that some are already chosen to be damned, a doctrine which removes all human agency or intervention in righteous judgement but demands worship regardless.

The twist of the volta defines the sonnet as a direct 'dispute with thee' (line 9) and acknowledges the speaker's impudence that they dare question the design of God. The disrupted meter of 'O God? Oh' (line 10) could be conveying the emotional conviction that exercises in meditation aim for. On the other hand, combined with the inflated language of a 'Lethan flood' (line 11) of tears and blood, it may compose a dramatization of these divine deliberations that could temper their irreverence through the defence of hyperbole and satire. The poem may also offer some resolution of the speaker's topical doubts about salvation. The final rhyming couplet of 'debt' (line 13) and 'forget' (line 14) emphasize the polarizing dichotomy of Reformation theology: the Catholic belief that sin is 'debt' and salvation is earned, versus the Protestant conviction that, for the predetermined chosen, sins are forgotten and salvation is through grace. Although the speaker appears to accept the Protestant-favouring conclusion of the last line, this resolution is somewhat undermined by the doubtful language of 'I think it mercy if thou wilt forget' (line 14). 'I think' may be an assertion of free will against Protestant predeterminism, destabilising the confidence of the meditation's colloquy and demonstrating the radical nature of forming individual opinions in early modern English society. The ambiguous 'if' leaves the state of the speaker's salvation undetermined. This reiterates that while these sonnets claim to 'dispute with' God, as Donne attempted to have 'many debates betwixt God and himself',²² nevertheless the speaker is left to 'think', to meditate, but never to be certain of God's response. The sonnet can function as a dramatic monologue, but never quite becomes a conversation.

The Biblical language of debt is also employed in Holy Sonnet 17: 'Since *she* whom *I* loved hath *paid* her *last debt*' (line 1, emphasis added). This unconventional symmetry of beats stresses the agonising past tense of 'I loved' and finality of 'last debt' to articulate the speaker's grief at the loss of his lover. This grief may be mingled with anger and accusation that God claimed 'her last debt' of life, imposing 'death on else-immortal us'. This anger can be inferred from the bold language of 'early into heaven ravishèd' (line 3), suggesting a

²¹ Scherer Herz, p104.

²² John Donne the younger, 'To the Reader', in John Donne, ed. Augustus Jessopp, *Essays in Divinity, By John Donne, D. D.* (London: John Tuppings, 1855), [https://hdl.handle.net/2027/uc1.\\$b183789](https://hdl.handle.net/2027/uc1.$b183789) [accessed 10/01/20], p83.

violation of the natural order and a violent, cruel selfishness of God taking away her life. However, comparing this language to its use in Holy Sonnet 14 ('Batter my heart...')²³ in which the speaker asks to be 'ravished' by God, the visceral word may actually adopt the positive connotations of being overwhelmed with wonder and desire. The speaker could even be envious of their lost love, longing also to be taken with them 'early into heaven'. Additionally, line 2 moderates the interpretation of a tone of anger by suggesting her debt was owed 'To Nature, and to hers' (line 2). This could imply that the death was dolled by her own children; many critics have understood this sonnet as resonating personally with John Donne after the death of Anne Donne shortly after childbirth. Through Donne's writings, one may extrapolate John and Anne Donne's love as 'one of the few constants in a chaotic and changeable world',²⁴ a sacrosanct truth within the unstable social, political, and religious context of their lives. Donne's poetry describes 'love as an antidote to the impermanence and mortality that characterises the rest of the world',²⁵ but this illusionary ideal crumbles in the face of death. Without this love, 'my good is dead' (line 2) and the communion of body and soul, expressed joyously in Donne's other poetry, is devastated. The significance of this loss is communicated through the sonnet's stress pattern – the speaker is left only with their 'mind' (lines 4-5), their 'head' (line 6), to 'think' (Holy Sonnet 9, line 14) but not to hold, irrevocably incomplete.

The turmoil of this bereavement is indicated by the poem's form. Like Holy Sonnet 18, this sonnet employs the same rhyme scheme, initially utilising Petrarchan convention then transfiguring into a Spenserian sestet. Yet, contrary to Holy Sonnet 18, Donne not only displaces the expectations of the volta but repeatedly shifts the speaker's argument: 'But though' (line 7), 'But why' (line 9), 'But in' (line 13), indicative of the back-and-forth wrestling of emotion and urge to bargain with God in his mourning. The poem introduces the Petrarchan understanding that adoring the ideal lover is 'leading him to a spiritual awareness and an eventual appreciation of the majesty of God's grace'.²⁶ Like Petrarch, the speaker suggests that 'admiring her my mind did whet | To seek thee, God; so streams do show the head' (lines 5-6). This imagery of water as a site of adoration and revelation portrays the Biblical narrative of 'a spring of water welling up to eternal life',²⁷ with the speaker's devotion to his lover leading to greater depths of spiritual love. Punning on 'whet', it is his lover's own 'heart [from which] will flow rivers of living water'²⁸ that prepares and guides the speaker to

²³ Donne, 'Holy Sonnets', p964.

²⁴ Andrew Hadfield, 'Literary contexts: predecessors and contemporaries', ed. Achsah Guibbory, *The Cambridge Companion to John Donne*, p63.

²⁵ Achsah Guibbory, 'Erotic poetry', ed. Achsah Guibbory, *The Cambridge Companion to John Donne*, p138.

²⁶ Hadfield, p56.

²⁷ John 4:14

²⁸ John 7:38

the spring of life. Although, how 'Wholly' (line 4) the speaker's acceptance truly is is contestable; the trochaic foot placing stress on 'Wholly' may be interpreted either as sincere religious conviction or as strained confidence, desperately trying to convince himself and God of his undivided devotion. The disruptive caesura that severs line 6 may evoke the anger experienced in grief, reigniting the accusatory tone that lays responsibility for her death at 'the head' - the ravishing God. The sonnet continues to allude to the spring of life but rejects its promised fulfilment. The Bible claims that 'whoever believes in me shall never thirst'²⁹ and 'whoever drinks of the water that I will give him will never be thirsty again'.³⁰ In contrast, although the speaker's 'thirst has been fed | A holy thirsty dropsy melts me yet' (lines 7-8). The persistent assonance of this 'holy thirsty dropsy' is charged with the insatiable, self-perpetuating and self-destructive thirst of the speaker. The craving for his lost love engulfs the promised quenching offered by religion.

The speaker attempts to reconcile this dissatisfaction by acknowledging the privilege of 'thou | Dost woo my soul' (lines 9-10) and appreciating his lover's salvation through Christ's sacrifice. But insecurities are illuminated in this holy courtship: God fears 'lest I allow | My love to saints and angels' (lines 11-12). This possessive nature of devotion exemplifies contemporary anxieties over idolatry, as the Church of England came to denounce the worship of 'saints and angels'. Correspondingly, the speaker divides his devotion to God with his loyalty to his lover, exposing the contradictions of Petrarchan idealisation of women and possibly Donne's personal conflict between romantic and religious attention. Glorifying the lover invokes God's 'tender jealousy' (line 13); on the surface, these attributes appear oxymoronic, but Donne is using the Biblical precedent 'for the Lord, whose name is Jealous'.³¹ This 'divine jealousy' is incited by both the 'betrothed' Church contending with its divisive Reformation disputes as well as the individual caught between 'she whom I loved' and dedication to God. The sonnet insinuates a sharp edge to God's 'tender jealousy', implying that the lover was 'early into heaven ravishèd' because the speaker worshiped her over God, a theologically unacceptable intensity of devotion in early modern England that threatened the very chain of being. Thus, the speaker assigns culpability for his lover's death to himself, but also to God, a radically unconventional perspective to express through Petrarchan poetry.

Despite the speaker's efforts to reason against his divided affections, the sonnet does not necessarily resolve with whole-hearted commitment to God. The irregular meter and

²⁹ John 6:35

³⁰ John 4:14

³¹ Exodus 34:14

ambiguous statement of the concluding lines, culminating in the rhyming couplet of 'doubt' (line 13) and 'out' (line 14), may in fact suggest that doubt has not been pushed out. While one interpretation may read the speaker's tone as a rejection of 'the world, flesh, yea, devil' (line 14) in favour of God, another reading may extrapolate an ultimatum: the speaker may still 'put thee out' (line 14). He remains bargaining with God as he processes his grief, a microcosm of the personal and political epidemic of spiritual doubt and renegotiation of religious beliefs across early modern Europe. By reworking poetic conventions to articulate a kaleidoscope of religious perspectives, Donne's Holy Sonnets disclose the debates and ensuing anxiety over religious reform that dominated his political context and private meditations. Switching between singular and plural pronouns, his speakers advocate for both public and personal revelation. However, the Holy Sonnets are inescapably one-sided; although they are saturated with Biblical allusions, the poetry is also riddled with the absence of divinity, of a response to the many questions posed. Paralleling the pressures of the Reformation era, the individual is left to ascertain their own 'self-truth' within the chaotic cacophony of opposing voices and the conspicuous silence of the voice that matters most.

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