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Conflicting Roles of the Speaker and the Divine in the *Holy Sonnets*

Annette Challis

*But swear by thyself, that at my death thy Son
Shall shine as he shines now, and heretofore;
And, having done that, thou hast done;
I fear no more.*
—John Donne, “A Hymn to God the Father”

Scholars argue that this poem was written either in 1623 when Donne contracted a dangerous fever or in 1630 on his deathbed. With Judgment imminent, Donne portrays himself as a humble son calling out to a divine Father for reassurance that grace will absolve him of his sins. The final line “I fear no more” expresses that he does receive reassurance (18). However, such confidence is not present in the *Holy Sonnets*. In two of these sonnets, “Since she whom I loved” and “Oh, to vex me,” Donne portrays himself as the secular lover of God, rather than a son. Likely written around the time of his wife’s death in 1617, these sonnets do not have assurance and absolution but rather confusion and frustration. They compare the speaker’s insincere desire for God to a Lover’s narcissistic desire, which is typical in Petrarchan sonnets.

Scholars typically place the speaker in the role of Lover, with God as the unattainable Beloved. While the speaker's musings in the *Holy Sonnets* align with some Petrarchan conventions, they deviate in crucial ways that transform the role of the speaker. Because of the speaker's infidelity, he proves to be no Lover at all; in reality, God's complete devotion makes Him the true Lover, and the speaker becomes the adulterous, unattainable Beloved. Reversing the traditional role of the speaker reveals his fallen nature and his need for God's grace, demonstrating the interdependency of human and divine love; God needs the speaker's sin and adultery because only with sin and adultery will the speaker need God's grace. While this relationship establishes a need for Christ's grace, it falls short of cultivating true repentance because the role of the speaker as the unattainable Beloved inherently denies union with God and misplaces God as an equal partner rather than the Creator. The sins and adulteries preventing contrition established in these sonnets can only be resolved when Donne takes his rightful place as son of God in "Hymn to God the Father." While the sonnets embody the fallen nature necessary to create a need for Christ, Donne's death-bed poem embodies the transcendence of that nature as he fills his role as son to a Divine Father.

I. Petrarchan Love in the Holy Sonnets

The *Holy Sonnets* are connected to the Petrarchan lyrical tradition through their rhyme scheme and fourteen-line structure composed of an octave and sestet. Petrarchan conventions mandate that the speaker of a sonnet be the Lover; however, Donne reverses this expectation in "Since she whom I loved" and "Oh, to vex me." In these sonnets, the speaker's infidelity makes him the unattainable Beloved of God, and God's devotion makes Him the true Lover. The speaker's secular view of Divinity reveals his fallen nature and his profound need for God's grace.

In "Since she whom I loved," the speaker views God in an erotic lens by literalizing the biblical metaphor of Christ as husband and the church or individual as the bride. The sonnet begins with an apostrophe as the speaker laments the death of his Beloved, who is often interpreted to be Donne's wife, Anne More (1-4). Desiring a woman who is made unattainable by death is traditional in Petrarchan sonnets, but this desire is unconventionally transferred to God in line six as the speaker "seek[s] thee God." Even though the structures

and metaphors of Petrarchan poetry are present, the speaker fails to express the musings of devotion that characterize the role of Lover, and he ultimately becomes the Beloved. The speaker expresses his adulteries, exposing his need for Christ and the mutual dependency of human and divine love.

Donne deviates from Petrarchan conventions because the unattainable lady (God) reciprocates and transcends the speaker's love and ultimately becomes a more appropriate Lover than the speaker. God is unlike the Petrarchan Beloved because He offers His "all" ("Since she" 10). He is more accurately the Lover because of the "tender jealousy" He develops when His Beloved is unfaithful to Him (13). God is responding to the Beloved's adultery not in anger or abandonment but in jealousy that is "tender" and loving. It is God, not the speaker, who is jealously trying to woo the Beloved. God unsuccessfully "woos [the speaker's] soul" just as a Petrarchan Lover tries to woo the Beloved (10). By reversing Petrarchan expectations, Donne affirms the sharp contrast between conventional Petrarchan love and the complete, perfect love of God. The speaker is certain that God offers His "all," and it is the speaker's lack of devotion that is preventing their union. God even surpasses Petrarchan love as He offers true devotion. He is not just a secular Petrarchan Lover, but the true, perfect Lover who will never abandon His unreachable Beloved.

The speaker proves to be an inadequate Lover as he takes on the role as Christ's adulterous bride. His adultery ultimately makes him the unattainable Beloved. While the church is metaphorically depicted as the bride of Christ in the New Testament, Donne "disregard[s] the corporate bridal church in favor of the individual bridal soul" (Johnson 35). Donne views each individual as Christ's spouse, married through communion. In the sestet of "Since she whom I loved" the speaker becomes the bride, though an adulterous one. The Lover should be captivated with his Beloved, but he is completely unsatisfied and adulterous to his spouse. The speaker laments that though his God has given His "all" ("Since she" 10), he continues to have a "thirsty dropsy" (8) and to "beg more love" (9), suggesting infidelity as the speaker thirsts for love outside of his relationship with God. He tries to satisfy his thirst through his "love to saints and angels" (12). He is seeking for love in other places and repeatedly expresses his infidelity. He even warns God of the possibility that the "devil put thee out" (14). The speaker is not only unfaithful to God but is cavorting with His enemy. His love for the devil, or sin, has the potential to extinguish his love of God. Donne goes beyond insincerity by making the speaker entirely doubtful and adulterous. The speaker is not just insincere or reluctant but betrays his spouse,

undermining his role as Lover. Because of his lack of devotion and adultery, the speaker is not the Lover but actually the Beloved of the true Lover, God.

This adultery against God is turned specifically to Donne's wife, revealing the communion of human and divine love. Although "Since she whom I loved" offers a sharp contrast between human and divine love, the speaker ironically claims that these two kinds of love are derived from the same source. As Donne laments his wife's death, he claims that his secular love for her set his mind on "heavenly things" (4). He claims, "Here the admiring her my mind did whet / To seek thee God; so streams do show the head" (5-6). His love for his wife has led him to search for God, proving that both streams of love have the same source. His secular love for Anne has actually inspired his love for the divine. Line two contains a pun where the speaker states that his "good is dead," similar in sound to "God is dead." The death of his wife is entwined with the death of goodness and the death of God. Donne's love for God derives from and is dependent on the secular love for his wife as God dies along with her. However, it also can be interpreted to indicate that his wife actually was his goodness and his God. As she dies, the speaker's "good" and "God" dies, making her an idol of worship. The speaker laments that he "beg[s] more love," which is likely a pun on his wife's name, reinforcing that his love for Anne More is adultery against God (9). Donne's love for his wife is simultaneously necessary for devotion to God and adultery against God. Secular love at the same time inspires and hinders divine love, forming a paradox.

This paradox that human love simultaneously hinders and enables divine love can be resolved through examining the interdependency of human and divine love. Lindsay Mann argues that Donne's expression of the corruption of natural and physical is "simply an insistence on the effects of the Fall and sin; but the point of this insistence is that these effects can and must be offset to a degree by grace" (535). Donne employs Petrarchan conventions not to suggest that love of God is like erotic love, but rather to acknowledge the fallen nature of humankind, he embodies in verse the need for redemption. Because of the Fall, man cannot embrace divine love; therefore, he must understand God through secular love. The speaker's "human love can realistically lead to and participate in divine love, despite human limits and fallings" (Mann 546). Thus human love is not in opposition to divine love, but rather is a preparatory love. The *Holy Sonnets* do not offer a speaker who has overcome his fallen nature; they expose that fallen nature. God uses "men's imperfections to draw

them to him” (Mann 537). Human love hinders divine love because it leads to the adulteries, yet it is those adulteries that create a need for atonement.

The fallen nature of man and need for grace is also prevalent in “Oh, to vex me,” as the speaker again uses the secular love of Petrarchism to frame his relationship with God. In this sonnet, his adultery is described as “inconstancy,” and he himself becomes another person who is in competition with God; he loves himself too much to recognize his nothingness and dependence on the Divine. This sonnet affirms the complete selfless love of God and the perpetual unattainability of the selfish Beloved. The secular relationship fails to inspire true repentance in the speaker, revealing its inadequacies.

The speaker in “Oh, to vex me” tries to resolve the paradox in which his inconstancy inspires constancy in God, and this inconstancy ultimately shows that he is not the devoted Lover, but the adulterous Beloved. In the octave, Donne presents inconstancy as the Beloved’s defining characteristic as he expresses repeatedly the “contraries” that “meet in one” (“vex me” 1). His devotion, love, temperance, and voice are all described as conflicting. His contrition and his love are “humorous” (5), which in Donne’s time meant “changing” (“humorous,” def. 3a). The speaker is repeatedly described as inconstant until it becomes his sole characteristic. This list of contradictions conclude with “as infinite, as none” demonstrating how his entire being is a paradox (8). The speaker does not express devotion to God but rather inconstancy. The Beloved is obsessed with his own paradoxes and is enamored with his own image.

Donne intensifies the narcissism that is conventional to Petrarchan poetry to undo the speaker’s role as Lover and reveal his true role as Beloved. Rather than declaring an adulterous affair with his wife, angels, and the devil as he does in “Since she whom I loved,” Donne suggests that love of self competes with love of God. There is no mention of God in the octave, and there is little characterization of Him other than how He affects the speaker throughout the rest of the poem. A Petrarchan Lover should be “wholly enamored with the image of the Beloved,” yet the speaker offers little description of God (Kuchar 543). The image he is enamored with is his own. Gary Kuchar rightly points out that narcissism is typical to Petrarchan sonnets (537); however, Donne goes beyond narcissism. He is not narcissistically expressing devotion to the Beloved but rather narcissistically expressing his own unattainability.

The switch in focus indicates that he is not the conventional Lover but rather the Beloved. His narcissism prevents him from repenting and makes him unattainable to God, as the Petrarchan Beloved should be. Kuchar argues,

“The speaker wants to express full contrition for his sins . . . at the same time as he experiences terror over the narcissistically traumatic insight that such contrition entails” (537). He is willing to admit that he is inadequate but is reluctant to admit that he is nothing without God. The speaker tries to make himself equal with God by viewing God as a secular lover and cannot admit his dependency on God; consequentially, he cannot transcend his fallen nature. Donne emphasizes this reluctance with the phrase “as infinite, as none” (“vex me” 8). He is as infinite as he is nothing. The Beloved wants to repent and fully love God, but he does not want to recognize that he is nothing. God responds to this reluctance with constancy as the speaker struggles to understand how the Lover can accept such infidelity.

Petrarchan lovesickness is traditionally caused by a woman’s refusal or inability to reciprocate love; however, in “Oh, to vex me” it is caused by God’s constant love. The first phrase, “oh, to vex me,” initiates this tone of lamentation and suffering. “Oh” connotes a sort of dejected sigh, while “vex” indicates that the speaker is frustrated or worried. The speaker immediately makes it very clear that he is deeply concerned with his lack of faith: his fallen nature causes him to suffer.

The personification of inconstancy that follows suggests that he is even disturbed. “Inconstancy unnaturally hath begot / A constant habit” (2–3). This personification of inconstancy indicates that the speaker is constantly inconstant, and his habit of inconstancy is a disturbing, unnatural child born out of paradox. This emphasizes the disturbing effects of the speaker’s fallen nature. The personification also insinuates that the speaker’s inconstancy has born constancy in God. Because the speaker has a fallen, inconstant nature, he has a constant need for God’s grace. In God’s selflessness, He consistently offers it. Just as Petrarchan sonnets demand, the speaker suffers greatly because of his love affair; however, it is the speaker’s unattainability that causes the suffering.

Despite the narcissism, adultery and insincerity, God still loves His Beloved. Further, Kimberly Johnson claims that God loves the Beloved *because* of his inadequacies (37). God’s constancy is born out of the speaker’s inconstancy, implying that the speaker’s sins and adulteries are actually the mother or creator of God’s perfect devotion. God’s divine love is dependent on the imperfect secular love of the speaker. The final two lines of “Oh, to vex me” portray this paradoxical need for inconstancy. The Beloved claims, “Those are my best days, when I shake with fear” (14). Initially, it appears ironic that his best days would be those where his “fantastic ague” is so severe that he shakes (13). However, this

shaking is connected to the earlier phrase in line eleven where he “quakes with true fear of his rod,” alluding to Isaiah 11:4, where God in His wrath will “smite the earth with the rod of His mouth . . . and slay the wicked.” The shaking with fear means that the speaker is sick with inconstancy, creating a need for God, and he is shaking with fear of His rod, suggesting the potential for repentance. This process of repentance confirms that human and divine nature “depend mutually on each other for their ultimate fulfillment” (Mann 536). God needs the speaker’s inconstancy because it will require His constant outpouring of grace. While this inconstancy serves to create a need for God, it ultimately fails to inspire true repentance.

The process of repentance is compared to a process of refining steel that has gone awry, showing how elusive the Beloved’s repentance is. The speaker describes his love as “riddingly distempered, cold and hot” (“vex me” 7). “Distempered” refers to an illness, paralleling the “fantastic ague” simile (13). In addition, it alludes to the tempering process used to strengthen steel. Tempering is when steel is subjected to extreme heat followed by extreme cold, increasing the toughness. Distemper would be when this process goes awry (“distempered,” def. 6). This alternate meaning is reinforced as the word “distempered” is immediately followed by “cold and hot” (“vex me,” 7). The hot and cold caused by the fever is compared with the hot and cold process of strengthening steel. This process of inconstancy and repentance is meant to strengthen the Beloved like a tempering process strengthens steel, but it has gone amiss, and he is left “distempered.” He is not strengthened but is sick. The final line declares that his best days are the days in which he is the most sick because it is that sickness that strengthens his relationship with God. However, because this strengthening process is awry, this resolution fails, and the Beloved continues to be unattainable to God. The Beloved remains in a perpetual cycle of insincerity and adultery where he attempts full contrition, refuses to admit his dependency on God, and fails.

The adulterous bridal trope and Petrarchan structures in “Since she whom I loved” and “Oh, to vex me” express the interdependency of human and divine love. It is the adultery of the bride that makes her an ideal spouse for Christ because without that uncleanness, “the soul would have no need of the marriage” (Johnson 38). This marriage shows a sharp comparison between the speaker’s secular love and God’s divine love, though both kinds of love ultimately need each other for their fulfillment. The speaker’s love is selfish because he loves God only because God can provide him salvation. God is merely a mistress he

needs for redemption. This is why he is wholly enamored with his own image rather than God's. God—the true Lover—takes no thought for His own advantages but loves so that His Beloved can achieve salvation. God marries the speaker not because He benefits, but solely because the speaker benefits. He views His Beloved as a cherished bride that He will never abandon. Donne presents us with a God whose love is completely selfless and incomprehensible to the speaker. The Lover offers devotion and love as he tries to refine his Beloved like a blacksmith refines steel; however, the Beloved refuses to submit. The Beloved remains the unattainable desire of a jealous God.

In these two sonnets, the failure of the speaker to fully repent is the result of a fundamental flaw in his view of God. His fallen nature limits him to viewing God in a secular relationship. This relationship places the speaker and God on equal footing. He tries to fit God into the role of a secular lover, but God's selflessness makes it impossible. God does not behave the way a secular lover should, making the marriage metaphor an inaccurate representation of His relationship with the speaker. This misrepresentation results in a string of confusing paradoxes as the speaker tries to fit God into his secular frame, calling attention to the absurdity of viewing God as a secular lover. While the secular view of God does create a need for His grace, ultimately, such a view prevents the speaker from recognizing his nothingness and repenting. The speaker cannot reconcile himself with God until he abandons this mindset and recognizes his dependency.

The mixed metaphors and convoluted nature of the speaker's relationship with God show how human love and divine love have continuity. He fills the role of Lover because of Petrarchan structures but proves to actually be the Beloved because of his unattainable contrition. This interchangeability between the speaker and God shows continuity between their two kinds of Love. The speaker's adulteries with his wife, the devil, and himself both hinder and enable divine love. The sonnets embody mankind's fallen nature and the profound need for grace. The speaker's relationship with God is not resolved in the *Holy Sonnets* because of the crucial flaw in viewing God as a secular lover. God is not an equal partner to the speaker but rather the Divine Creator on which the speaker is dependent. Only in completely reimagining the role of God can this relationship be resolved. In "A Hymn to God the Father," Donne takes on his justified role as the son of the Divine Father.

II. Filial Dependence Replaces the Adulterous Marriage

In “A Hymn to God the Father,” Donne finally reconciles his relationship with God as he takes his rightful place as son. The poem was written years after the *Holy Sonnets*, likely in a time when Donne believed he was nearing death and would soon meet God the Father (Pebworth 19). In this poem, the speaker is no longer equal to God as an erotic lover but rather is dependent and subordinate to God as His son. The selfless nature of parenthood accurately parallels the selfless love God has for the speaker. Donne’s view of God develops over time until he expresses his role as son, a role that can foster true repentance. Unlike the *Holy Sonnets*, each line is endstopped, creating a tone of absolutism and finality. Further, the Petrarchan sonnet structure is abandoned, suggesting that the speaker is no longer limited to a secular view of God. Donne is finally assured of his salvation and has true faith in God and His grace.

As a son, the speaker is no longer trying to make himself an equal, secular lover of God but rather a son who is helpless without his Father. In this new relationship, there is no room for the narcissism that prevented repentance in the *Holy Sonnets*. The speaker has recognized that he is nothing without his Father but everything to his Father. The paradoxes that vexed him in the sonnets now enable him to be redeemed. The *Holy Sonnets* reveal the speaker’s fallen nature, and the speaker finally transcends his fallen nature in “A Hymn to God the Father.” Donne is no longer unattainable in this new role because he is willing to admit his nothingness.

Portraying himself as a son resolves the adulteries established in the *Holy Sonnets*. Though he expresses that he still has sins, he no longer refers to them as “adulteries” or “inconstancies” as he did in the sonnets. This new view of sin expels its power to prevent devotion to God and instead allows repentance. As an adulterous bride, the speaker was betraying his spouse. The adultery caused a divide between the speaker and God. As a son, the speaker is now repentant and pleading for forgiveness. This sin will not cause a divide between the speaker and God but ultimately bring them closer as God selflessly offers grace to His son.

As a son, Donne’s love for his wife is not in competition with God. He ends the first two stanzas saying that God “hast not done, / For, I have more,” a phrase with dual meanings: it expresses that God’s grace is not done because

he has “more” sins, and David Leigh argues that it is a pun on his and his wife’s name, More (Leigh 90). In other words, God does not have Donne because he has his wife, “more.” Just as “She whom I loved” insinuated, Donne’s wife seems to be preventing Donne’s full devotion to God. However, in the final stanza the speaker says “thou hast done; / I fear no more.” Donne does not repeat that he “has no more”; this would mean that he has let go of Anne More in order to devote himself to God. Rather, he no longer fears that his love for Anne will compete with God. As a son rather than Lover, he can reconcile his love for his wife with his love for God. He does not fear sin because he is now humble enough to repent and does not fear Anne because his new role as son removes competition. Donne no longer has the “fear” that shook him in his sonnet “Oh, to vex me.” He has overcome his inconstancy and now is confident in the grace of God.

This confidence is expressed in line sixteen when the speaker states, “Thy son / Shall shine as he shines now.” This phrase also has duality in meaning: it conveys that he wants Christ’s grace to continue to absolve him in the next life just as it does now; in addition, Donne is also implicitly a son because this poem is an apostrophe to the “Father.” Donne is pleading that he himself will shine in the next life as he does in this life. He does not fear sin, for he will shine in repentance in the next life, and he will not fear Anne More, for his love for her will shine in coexistence with divine love. The speaker’s final role as a son calling out for forgiveness from his Father allows him to finally transcend his fallen nature and realize the true potential of secular love, as it is fulfilled in unity with the divine.

“A Hymn to God the Father” and the two *Holy Sonnets* show that overcoming the Fall is a process of recognition and repentance. “Since she whom I loved” and “Oh, to vex me” use Petrarchan conventions and the adulterous bride metaphor to expose the speaker’s fallen nature. The two *Holy Sonnets* call attention to the absurdity in viewing God as a spouse and its failure to inspire repentance. They establish the speaker’s need for grace and his nothingness without God. The speaker’s repentance is finally attained as he abandons the Petrarchan approach to God and accepts his rightful place as son.

Appendix

Holy Sonnets

17.

*Since she whom I loved hath paid her last debt
To nature, and to hers, and my good is dead,
And her soul early into heaven ravished,
Wholly in heavenly things my mind is set.
Here the admiring her my mind did whet
To seek thee God; so streams do show the head;
But though I have found thee'and thou my thirst hast fed,
A holy thirsty dropsy melts me yet.
But why should I beg more love, when as thou
Dost woo my soul, for hers off'ring all thine,
And dost not only fear lest I allow
My love to saints and angels, things divine,
But in thy tender jealousy dost doubt
Lest the world, flesh, yea, devil put thee out.*

19.

*Oh, to vex me, contraries meet in one:
Inconstancy unnaturally hath begot
A constant habit; that when I would not
I change in vows, and in devotion.
As humorous is my contrition
As my profane love, and as soon forgot:
As riddlingly distempered, cold and hot,
As praying, as mute; as infinite, as none.
I durst not view heaven yesterday; and today
In prayers, and flattering speeches I court God:
Tomorrow I quake with true fear of his rod.
So my devout fits come and go away
Like a fantastic ague: save that here
Those are my best days, when I shake with fear.*

A Hymn to God the Father

*Wilt Thou forgive that sin where I begun,
Which was my sin, though it were done before?
Wilt Thou forgive that sin, through which I run,
And do run still: though still I do deplore?
When Thou hast done, Thou hast not done,
For, I have more.*

*Wilt Thou forgive that sin which I have won
Others to sin? and, made my sin their door?
Wilt Thou forgive that sin which I did shun
A year or two: but wallowed in a score?
When Thou hast done, Thou hast not done,
For I have more.*

*I have a sin of fear, that when I have spun
My last thread, I shall perish on the shore;
But swear by Thyself, that at my death thy Son
Shall shine as He shines now, and heretofore;
And, having done that, Thou hast done;
I fear no more.*

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