The Divine Paradox: The use of paradox in English devotional lyrics from 1300-1650

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Despite the various changes which English lyric poetry underwent from the 14th-17th century, paradox remained a key feature of devotional verse. This is most explicit in the later poetry of this period: John Donne's 'Batter my heart' emphasises the paradoxical freedom found in Christ's service, while George Herbert's sonnet pair beginning 'My God, where is that ancient heat' portrays God's unexplainable omnipotence. But paradox is also important to late-medieval poems such as the Grimestone Manuscript's 'Love me brouthte', which educates the laity on the Incarnation paradox. Throughout, paradox was used to portray the incomprehensibility of God's great love.

Paradox is less obvious in 'Love me brouthte'. Woolf claims this is because the uneducated medieval laity audience 'prevents an equal emphasis upon the Divinity and Humanity of Christ and therefore leads to the exclusion of paradox arousing wonderment' as Donne and Herbert used.[1] But Lawson contends that the laity was likely less theologically ignorant than this, as Franciscans instructed them on Christ's divine Passion whilst 'stir[ring] a response of identification with Christ's humanity and his suffering on [Humankind's] behalf'.[2] John of Grimestone was one such Franciscan friar.[3] Through 'Love me brouthte', he educates his congregation on this paradoxical dual nature. As the accusative 'me', Christ is the human object of love's divine agency.[4] But the possessive pronoun 'my' (l.10) indicates Christ's authoritative ownership of love.

As Gray explains, the poem adapts John 1 to present 'the paradox that it was love which slew him' despite love being 'the nature of God himself'.[5] Further consideration should be given to the poem's parallels with vv.10-11:

> …the world was made by Him, and the world knew
> Him not. He came unto His own, and His own
> received him not.[6]

All things were 'made by' Christ, yet love 'wrouthte' Him (l.2) – it 'ma[d]e' Him and purposefully 'act[ed]' or 'operate[d]' through Him.[7] Thus the poem reflects how Christ,

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[1] Rosemary Woolf, *The English Religious Lyric in the Middle Ages* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1968), p.9.
[2] Kevin E. Lawson, 'Learning the Faith in England in the Later Middle Ages: Contributions of the Franciscan Friars', *Religious Education*, 107:2 (2012), 139-157 (pp.150-1).
[3] J.A. Burrow and Thorlac Turville-Petre (eds.), *A Book of Middle English*, 3rd edn (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), p.265.
[4] '14q' ('Love me brouthte'), in Burrow and Turville-Petre, *A Book of Middle English*, pp.269-70, ll.1-2, 4-9. Hereafter, references to this poem will be given to this edition with the line numbers in parentheses.
[5] Douglas Gray, *Themes and Images in the Medieval English Religious Lyric* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1972), p.80.
[6] John 1.10-11 (Douay-Rheims), <https://drbo.org/> [accessed 18th December 2021].
[7] *Middle English Dictionary*, <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/middle-english-dictionary/dictionary> [accessed 27th December 2021], 'werken v.(1)', senses 1(a-b), 2(a), 10(a).

although Creator, is also God 'made flesh' according to the active will of the Father who 'is charity' or love.[8] This encapsulates the Trinitarian paradox: both Father and Son are God, but the Son is distinct from and submissive to the Father. Additionally, love 'lettet' Christ on Earth (l.6) – it 'hinder[ed]' or 'restrain[ed]' Him there, highlighting His apparent lack of omnipotent freedom.[9] But paradoxically, 'for love [Christ] ches' (l.11) freely to take on these constraints of a worldly body. Even when 'restrain[ed]', He retains His free will and thereby control.

Christ 'ches' these constraints to become Man's 'fere' (l.3) – a 'companion', 'equal' or 'spouse', with whom the audience could (returning to Lawson) 'identif[y]' through their shared 'humanity'.[10] But Christ's 'spouse' does not reciprocate his love (He must 'byʒen' them (l.12)) and His 'companion' paradoxically neither 'knew' nor 'received Him'. 'Equal' is also problematic: they were not comparably 'wrouhte' in love, nor did they 'ches' to die 'for love'. Spearman argues the lyrical 'I' establishes an 'empty space, waiting to be occupied by any reader'.[11] But no reader can identify with Christ's divine nature formed by 'love'. Through paradox, the poet highlights Christ's humility. As God He owns and commands love, still He willingly subjected Himself to and suffered for love that His disobedient beloved might know and identify with His human self.

The final stanza shifts the focus from Christ's sufferings to their application for Humankind. Christians need not 'dred' (l.13), since Christ has 'wonnen' them (l.18). This reassurance is supported by one final paradox: despite being 'drou' (l.8) to 'byʒen' Humankind, Christ declares that 'To haven þe / Wel is me' (ll.16-17). 'Drouwen' means to 'dry out' or 'impair', graphically illustrating Christ's blood poured out, and His human inability, on the Cross.[12] Yet He calls this 'wel'. As Turville-Petre asserts, 'texts were modified to suit the needs and tastes of the audience.'[13] In 'Love me Brouthte', the poet has 'modified' the secular troubadour tradition of paradoxical amatory love (as found in the Harley Lyric 'My deþ y love, my lyf ich hate') for his sermon audience.[14] Instead of love being both an agony to the speaker who cannot attain his lover and a joy to him when he is with her, it is a joy and an agony to Christ as He delights in suffering for His 'fere'. Thus while Woolf's 'paradox arousing wonderment' is less explicit here than in Renaissance poetry, its subtlety aids Grimestone's audience in unpacking the mystery that Christ owned love as his 'pes' (l.10) even as it controlled and 'slou' Him, and encourages them to marvel at Christ's supernatural love for them.

Similarly, Donne 'modifie[s]' the sonnet, which in 16th century England was mainly used for amatory purposes. To Parry, Donne re-utilises the secular sonnet's pattern: the octet's 'dramatic' scene as 'the locus of meditation', followed by the sestet's 'analysis directed towards understanding'.[15] While Wyatt and Sidney generally use this mode to examine human love's complexities, Donne uses it in 'Batter my heart' to marvel at God's

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[8] John 1.14; 1 John 4.8, 16.
[9] *M.E.D*, 'letten v.'
[10] *MED*, 'fēre n.(1)', senses 1-3.
[11] A.C. Spearing, *Textual Subjectivity: The Encoding of Subjectivity in Medieval Narratives and Lyrics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), p.189.
[12] *M.E.D.*, 'drŏu(w)en v.', sense 1.
[13] Thorlac Turville-Petre, *Reading Middle-English Literature* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2007), p.43.
[14] '14j' ('My deþ y love, my lyf ich hate'), in Burrow and Turville-Petre, *Book of Middle English*, pp.262-4.
[15] Graham Parry, *Seventeenth-Century Poetry: The Social Context* (London: Hutchinson, 1985), p.68.

salvation power to 'make me new' (the 'locus of meditation'), which leads to his 'analysis' of his fallen state and the paradoxical freedom found in God's service.[16]

Lewalski marks Donne's circular praise pattern: his devotional poetry typically forms a prayer which begins and ends by glorifying God, representing an infinite circle of praise.[17] But in 'Batter my heart', the circle is more of a petition for spiritual growth, delivered through paradoxes to highlight that without God, sanctification is impossible. To begin the circle, Donne asks God to '[b]atter my heart' to 'mend' it, and 'o'erthrow me' that he may 'rise, and stand' (ll.1-3). Parry argues the *Holy Sonnets* are 'meditations on [Donne's] sinful condition and [...] need of grace'.[18] This poem's paradoxes indicate that God's 'grace' sometimes means disciplining. Donne is aware that his sinful life needs '[b]atter[ing]' and 'o'erthrow[ing]', as God 'purge[s]' the righteous branches so that they 'may bring forth more fruit'.[19] Thereby, Donne emphasises that continual spiritual growth is difficult and requires God's intervention. Unlike in 'Love me brouthte', here Spearman's universal 'I' is wholly applicable. As Marotti writes, Donne's 'symbolic I' conjoins his 'personal religious experience' with 'communal piety and general truths'.[20] Written during the Reformation when many were questioning how to rightly honour God, the *Holy Sonnets* were sent only to Donne's trusted friends.[21] But through this poem, Donne invites his coterie to identify with his 'personal religious experience' to remind them of the 'communal piety and general truths' which all denominations can unite around: all have sinned, and require God's help or '[b]atter[ing]' to 'mend' their souls. Thus anyone – Catholic or Protestant – can place themselves in this penitent speaker's mind and pray for God's assistance in their battle against sin.

Nevertheless, the concluding paradox pair remains controversial:
> Except you enthrall mee, never shall be free
> Nor never chast, except you ravish mee.
> (ll.13-14)

To understand this paradoxical freedom and chastity, one must consider these lines within the whole sestet. Richey believes Donne's *Holy Sonnets* frequently approach a spiritual 'limit position', where the speaker discovers that 'to be bound by Satan is to be liberated by God'.[22] But in the octet, the speaker scarcely mentions his personal 'limit[s]'. It is only in the sestet that Donne confesses that, although 'Yet dearly I love [God]', he is 'betroth'd unto your enemie' (ll.9-10) ('bound by Satan'). The connective 'yet' signifies this volta; Donne no longer merely calls on God to act, but (returning to Parry) 'meditat[es] on his sinful condition'. Just as in 'Love me brouthte' Christ's unfaithful 'fere' needs buying back, Donne's speaker (also representative of all humanity) has been uncommitant in his 'love' for God, being 'betroth'd' to His 'enemie', sin. But whereas the Grimestone lyric focusses on how Christ's love led Him to bare Humankind's earthly constraints, Donne focusses on how this same

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[16] John Donne, 'Holy Sonnet XIV' ('Batter my heart'), in Herbert J.C. Grierson (ed.), *Donne: Poetical Works* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971), p.299 (l.4). Hereafter, references to this poem will be given to this edition with the line numbers in parentheses.

[17] Barbara Kiefer Lewalski, *Protestant Poetics and the Seventeenth-Century Religious Lyric* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979), p.257.

[18] Parry, *Seventeenth-Century Poetry*, p.68.

[19] John 15.2.

[20] Arthur F. Marotti, *John Donne, Coterie Poet* (Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 1986), p.260.

[21] John Carey (ed.), 'Introduction', in *John Donne: The Major Works* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), pp.xix-xxxii (pp.xxi-xxii).

[22] Esther Gilman Richey, 'The Intimate Other: Lutheran Subjectivity in Spenser, Donne, and Herbert', *Modern Philology*, 108:3 (2011), 343-374 (p.360).

love set Humankind 'free' from all bonds. By following the 'enemie', the speaker has become ensnared by sin's 'knot' (l.11). This represents the tight hold sin has over him, whilst symbolically depicting his marital 'knot' or link to worldly pleasures (not to God).[23] Consequently, he asks God to '[d]ivorce' and 'untie' him from sin (l.11).

However, Donne associates God too with enslavement: God must 'imprison' and 'enthrall' him. Contrary to Richey's analysis, confession is not enough to become 'liberated'; one must also become 'bound' to God by His Spirit. As Paul explains:

> …make not liberty an occasion to the flesh, but by
> charity of the Spirit serve one another. […]
> For the flesh lusteth against the Spirit: and the Spirit
> against the flesh; for these are contrary one to
> another…[24]

Having pledged himself to sin, the speaker is following 'the flesh' (worldly desires), which is 'against the Spirit'. Therefore, he asks that God 'enthrall' him by the Spirit into His 'serv[ice]', thereby setting him 'free' (or at 'liberty') to 'love' God as he 'dearely' desires. Thus the universal 'I' remains applicable in the sestet: Donne maintains an open persona so that his readers can place themselves in this position, contemplate their fallen states, and so recognise their need of God to find freedom in His service.

Likewise, Donne's readers could apply the chastity paradox to themselves. Richey believes this final line is Donne 'negating […] the very possibility of his agency and purity' and 'acknowledging that his intimacy with the Devil is the very knot mediating intimacy with God'.[25] Certainly Donne accepts human 'agency and purity' are impossible: he begins and ends by asking God to intervene for him. Donne's depicted fallen humanity is as powerless to resist sin as Christ's unfallen human nature in 'Love me brouthte' chose to be powerless beneath the Father's will. However, since Donne's speaker begs God to 'untie' him from Satan, this 'knot' clearly hinders rather than 'mediat[es] intimacy with God'. More likely, Donne's erotic language is a hyperbolised portrayal of the God of Hosea, who describes His people as His wife 'of fornication' who went 'after [her] lovers' – just as Donne's speaker is 'betroth'd' unto sin.[26] But God then promises to 'espouse thee to me forever'.[27] Donne's sexual imagery exaggerates this further: God must 'ravish' or definitively reclaim his people, as they cannot stop their impure lifestyles without His intervention. Thus, Donne composes a circle not of infinite praise, but of infinite prayer and dependence on God, knowing that 'chast[ity]' (commonly representing spiritual purity and sanctification) is found only in Him.[28] He reminds his readers that they will constantly require the Spirit to 'free' them from sin.

Whereas 'Love Me Brouhte' uses paradox to depict Christ's dual nature, and Donne to emphasise Humankind's need of God, Herbert uses it to marvel at God's incomprehensibility and praiseworthiness. His sonnet pair is best studied as one poem, being written together and thematically linked. As Rienstra explains, 'Herbert drew from

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[23] *Oxford English Dictionary*, <oed.com> [accessed 28th December 2021], 'knot, n.1' senses 1, 11b.
[24] Galatians 5.13, 17.
[25] Richey, *Intimate Other*, pp.365-6.
[26] Hosea 1.2, 2.5.
[27] Hosea 2.19.
[28] *O.E.D*, 'chastity, n.', sense 1b.

English Petrarchism' to establish a 'rivalry with love poetry'.[29] Like Donne he adapted the secular sonnet for religious purposes, but with a more overt rejection of secular topics. Herbert shows this 'rivalry' through various images, including his rhetorical question, 'Cannot thy Dove / Outstrip their Cupid [...]?'.[30] The intended readership was presumably his coterie of other poets.[31] By directly contrasting God's 'Dove' (a biblical symbol of the Spirit) with 'Cupid' (a Classical symbol of amatory love), Herbert invites them to question which topic is more worthy of presentation in the well-respected sonnet form.[32] He answers this through a metapoetical paradox, as he asks God,

> ...since thy ways are deep, and still the same,
> Will not a verse run smooth that bears thy name?
> (ll.10-11)

This is the poem's first adjacent rhyme pair, illustrating that a devotional 'verse' can 'run smooth'. The poem's form contradicts its content's doubts expressed in the question, thereby disproving them and revealing God to be a fitting sonnet subject matter. Paradoxes of form are subtler than Donne's word play, but more poetically sophisticated. They would impress Herbert's coterie – with whom he maintained what Rienstra calls his 'friendly poetic rivalry' – to prove to them that sonnets 'run smooth[er]' with the 'Dove' as the subject.[33]

Although Rienstra argues Herbert's sonnets use 'Donne-like' conceits, most of his paradoxes (excluding those relating to form) are simpler than Donne's.[34] Parry explains that this is because Herbert was careful when handling the 'paradox of religious poetry', which aimed to impress others with poetic wit whilst directing the reader's praise to God and not the poet.[35] For instance, fire is used to symbolise the 'ancient heat' of the Spirit and zeal for God with which 'Martyrs once did burn' (ll.1-2), but also to symbolise the 'other flames' (l.3) of worldly passion '[w]hose fire is wild and doth not upwards go / To praise' (ll.24-5). This image is not overly witty, but paradoxically it represents both Godly and worldly (specifically amatory) passions, which the poem repeatedly presents as in opposition to each other. Through it, Herbert depicts how alike the two passions are in some respects – both bring inner warmth and poetic inspiration – yet also highlights their nuances. The 'fire' of God's Spirit places His 'power and might' within the believer (l.12); it is an 'ancient', everlasting force, unlike the passions for worldly things which supply 'no braver fuel [...] / Than that, which one day worms' will devour (ll.13-4). Herbert contrasts transient worldly passions with the eternal God to show which is more worthy of poetic praise. He laments how sonneteers have lost the zeal of 'Martyrs', replacing their healthy 'praise' of God with a 'wild' (indicating 'inferior') praise of lovers.[36] But he does this without using excessively complex conceits that distract attention from his divine subject.

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[29] Debra Rienstra, "Let Wits Contest': George Herbert and the English Sonnet Sequence', *George Herbert Journal*, 35:1 (2012), 23-44 (p.24).

[30] George Herbert, 'Sonnets, from Walton's Life of Herbert', in Louis L. Martz (ed.), *George Herbert and Henry Vaughan* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), p.186 (ll.8-9). Hereafter, references to this poem will be given to this edition with the line numbers in parentheses.

[31] Rienstra, "Let Wits Contest", p.23.

[32] Luke 3.22; Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, trans. David Raeburn (London: Penguin, 2004), Book I ll.454-5.

[33] Rienstra, "Let Wits Contest", p.23.

[34] Rienstra, ibid., p.24.

[35] Parry, *Seventeenth-Century Poetry*, p.87.

[36] *O.E.D*, 'wild, adj. and n.', sense 3a.

As Parry writes, Herbert's primary poetic purpose was 'thanksgiving', so he stuck to 'simple' images applied in unexpected ways in order to 'praise God'.[37] This fire imagery is one such image, although its purpose is more to convince Herbert's coterie that God is a more worthwhile sonnet subject than to directly 'praise' Him. Another example of Herbert's 'simple' imagery is his declaration that 'there is enough in thee [God] to dry / Oceans of ink' (ll.15-6) even whilst God's 'Majesty' is represented in 'the Deluge' (Noah's flood) (ll.16-7). God is both a drying fire and a drowning flood. This fits Parry's conclusions better: 'simple' but paradoxical images emphasise God's omnipotence, praising Him as One beyond the limits of human understanding. Likewise, Herbert's decision to 'on thee, Lord, some ink bestow' (l.25) despite knowing that 'there is enough in thee to dry / Oceans of ink' illustrates God's limitlessness: there are endless reasons to praise Him, so Herbert will do so despite knowing that He cannot give all that God is due.

All three poets adapt traditional secular paradoxes and poetic forms to present religious material. 'Love me brouthte' is subtler, reflecting on the Incarnation without becoming too complex for the laity audience. Contrastingly, Donne's paradoxes are explicit, making blatant the impossibility of freedom and purity without God's aid. Herbert's are wittier than those of 'Love me brouthte' but subtler than Donne's, so that the reader will praise God's incomprehensibility before praising Herbert's poetic skill. Whereas Donne's paradoxes challenge his readers to make them reflect on their dependence on God, and 'Love me brouthte' encourages an emotional and reflective response to Christ's humility, Herbert is less personal and aims primarily to praise God. Despite their differences, the poems prove that throughout the period paradox remained necessary for presenting the complexity of God's nature and His work in His people.

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[37] Parry, ibid., p.85.

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