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27 John Donne, *Songs and Sonnets* (1633)

Abstract: This chapter discusses John Donne's love poetry of the *Songs and Sonnets* and focuses on the dichotomic principle that is characteristic of Donne's work and, to some degree, of his biographical identity. It manifests itself as opposition, paradox, ambiguity and ambivalence, which are to be seen as features belonging not only to poetic style alone but also to the subjects represented and discussed by Donne's poetic speakers. Examples are the need for, and risk of, choice in matters of love and religion, as well as the identity and contrast of love and death. A reading of "A Lecture upon the Shadow" will show how Donne reflects on these subjects, and on the manifold dichotomies they entail, by presenting fictional speakers. He thus shows his subjects, and love in particular, to be acts of communication. The aesthetics involved are marked by Donne's making poetic form interact with the speakers' arguments. This is done by wordplay and metaphor ('metaphysical conceit') and by the variety and individuality of metrical and stanza forms. A brief outline of important stages of reception will conclude the chapter.

Keywords: Love, conceit, ambiguity, identity, manuscript circulation

1 Context: Author, Œuvre, Moment

John Donne's (1572–1631) *Songs and Sonnets* is a group of some 54 love poems that were published posthumously in the 1633 edition of Donne's *Poems*. They were first grouped together in print under the heading "Songs and Sonets" in the second edition (1635). The title "Songs and Sonnets" had been used in the table of contents of one of the manuscript collections of Donne's poetry (the O'Flahertie manuscript at Harvard, 1632; see http://donne.dh.tamu.edu/H06-biblio.html) but is probably not Donne's own. It echoes the name of the famous collection of love poetry, *Songes and Sonettes* (1557), better known as *Tottel's Miscellany* (Gardner 1965, xlvii), which comprises many of the poems by Sir Thomas Wyatt and the Earl of Surrey (↗ 13 Richard Tottel, *Songes and Sonettes*). If the title is an allusion to this collection, it is an ironical one: for neither is any of Donne's *Songs and Sonnets* a sonnet, nor do his poems evince the lyricism evoked by the term 'song' (Keeble 2002, 71–73).

This incongruity or contrariness, however, is not uncharacteristic of the poet's life and work. From early on, the myth and the critique of Donne have been built on the notion that there were two selves writing under that name: 'Jack' Donne, the wit and love poet of uncertain morality, and 'John' Donne, the philosopher and divine who became Dean of St. Paul's and is famous for his sermons and religious

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verse. This notion of a 'double' Donne was suggested by his first biographer, Isaac Walton, who presented his life as a conversion story reminiscent of St. Paul (Walton 1640, sig. B2^{v}) and St. Augustine (sig. B1^{v}–B2^{r}). After his conversion, "in his penitentiall yeares", Donne, according to Walton (1640, sig. B4^{r}), wished that his earlier self's love poems had been "so short-liv'd, that he had witnessed their funeralls." Modern biography and criticism have insisted that such a separation of two selves and two periods of Donne's life is wrong (Guibbory 2015, 68), and even Walton himself, while suggesting the division, stresses that the two selves and periods are indeed connected by Donne's veneration for "heavenly Poetry" (Walton 1640, sig. B4^{r}).

Walton's characterization of Donne the love poet is full of admiration:

> The recreations of his youth were Poetry, in which he was so happy, as if nature with all her varieties had been made to exercise his great wit, and high fancy. And in those pieces which were carelesly scattered in his younger daies (most of them being written before the twentieth yeare of his age) it may appear by his choice Metaphors, that all the Arts joyned to assist him with their utmost skill. (Walton 1640, sig. B4^{r})

The claim about Donne's age is clearly wrong since there are no topical and literary references suggesting that any of the poems extant were written before Donne was admitted to Lincoln's Inn in 1592 as a student of law. In fact, a number of such references point towards later dates of composition in the 1590s. Walton stresses several related features of Donne's secular poetry, however, that were to become stock tenets of criticism: for one thing, the predominance of "great wit, and high fancy" over nature, meaning that natural facts and reality in general are made subservient to the poetic *ingenium*; and, for another, the remarkable quality of his metaphors, which are taken from all fields of nature and art; a feature that was to gain further prominence in later criticism under the name of the 'metaphysical conceit.'

Walton's attempt at presenting us with a story of two Donnes, even though it has to be qualified, draws attention to a characteristic feature of the poet's life and art: doubleness in the sense of dichotomies, contrasts and ambiguities, which are sometimes maintained only to collapse, to be transformed into each other or to show their complex interdependence. This dichotomic principle is not exclusive to Donne but its pervasiveness distinguishes him from other early modern English poets. It can be seen in almost every aspect of his work and career, in his choice of subject and stylistic approach. The difficulty of dating Donne's poems provides an example: "Autumnal" is one of the poems commonly grouped among a set of love elegies modelled on Ovid's *Amores*, dated generally earlier than the *Songs and Sonnets*. Its speaker praises the kind of love triggered by the "Golden Age" (Donne 2010, 358, l. 7) of the revered woman: "No spring, nor summer beauty hath such grace, / As I have seen in one autumnal face" (ll. 1–2). If these lines are regarded as serious (and moving) praise, the early 1590s are an unlikely date, and we may believe that the poem was written when Donne met Magdalene Herbert (the mother of

the poet George Herbert) at Oxford, i.e. around 1611 (cf. Robbins's note in Donne 2010, 356). In this case, the poem moves closer to the verse letter, a genre in which Donne wrote "some of [his] most reflective and philosophical pieces of writing" (Marotti 2006, 42) and which is focused on the speaker's relation to the (named and frequently praised) addressee. An early date of composition, however, is likely if we read the poem as a paradoxical encomium (e.g. Marotti 1986, 51–52) in the vein of other love elegies such as "The Anagram", in which Donne mocks the conventional, insincere praise of female beauty: "she / Hath all things whereby others beauteous be: / For, though her eyes be small, her mouth is great" (Donne 2010, 335, ll. 1–3). Thus our interpretation will influence the dating and vice versa. This ambiguity is bound up with a question that also besets other early modern collections of poetry, most notably Shakespeare's sonnets (↗ 22 *Shakespeare's Sonnets*): in how far are they to be read biographically and refer to real rather than fictional persons and events?

The question allows for no general answer one way or the other, especially if we consider that playing with (fictional) identities befits a time when, for example, one's life could depend on having the 'right' confessional identity (↗ 7 Literature and Religion). Thus, in 1593, Donne had to witness the death of his brother Henry in plague-ridden Newgate prison (Flynn 2011, 423), where he had been confined for giving shelter to a Catholic priest. Donne, as a Catholic and a descendant of Sir Thomas More (↗ 11 Thomas More, *Utopia*), was prevented from taking a university degree. In 1584, at the age of twelve, he matriculated at Hart Hall (now Hertford College) Oxford but did not stay long. It is assumed that he continued his education on the continent before returning to London for his legal studies. In 1596 and 1597, he took part as a "gentleman-volunteer" (Marotti 2006, 37) in military expeditions against Spain. His poems "The Storm" and "The Calm" reflect the experience and, again through ambiguity, his ambivalent attitude towards patriotic sentiment (Labriola 2011, 425). In any case, Donne's hopes for a political career were shattered when, in 1601, he privately married, against her father's will, Anne More, who was still a minor at the time. This was an offence against canon law (Bald 1970, 130–31), for which Donne was briefly sent to prison; he also lost his position of secretary to Sir Thomas Egerton, the Lord Keeper of the Great Seal. Subsequent years saw him, "with children on the way, and no visible means of income", in constant search for employment, a period that ended only with his being ordained a priest in 1615 (Post 2006, 10).

During this time, Donne moved towards Protestantism, a shift marked by the publication of *Pseudo-Martyr* (1610), a treatise in which Donne argued that Roman Catholics could take the Oath of Allegiance to the king. In terms of poetry and style, inner debate and soliloquy characterize the search for truth in this phase. Especially in the verse satires and the sequence of *Holy Sonnets* Donne wrote at the time, the speaker talks to himself (or his soul) and assumes, reflects and discusses contrasting positions (cf. Zirker 2019). Donne's third satire ("Kind pity chokes my

spleen") in particular focuses on the idea of conversion as a search for the right faith: "On a huge hill / Craggèd and steep, Truth stands, and he that will / Reach her, about must, and about go" (Donne 2010, 393–94, ll. 79–81). The motif of turning (cf. Dörge 2018) is as characteristic of Donne as is the comparison of true religion to a woman that has to be sought and won. The latter image connects religion and love on the basis of an individual free decision, albeit one that must be taken: "thou / Of force must one, and forced but one allow" (ll. 69–70). Even though, in the poem, the various positions are set side by side, the emphasis on individual choice is itself a declaration in favour of Protestantism. If read biographically, the poem is a defence of Donne's own conversion against allegations of worldly ambition (cf. the debate on Donne's ambition outlined by Adlington 2011). Its central theme remained of utmost importance to him, as can be seen by his insistence on it in one of his sermons (the genre he perfected in the last phase of his life): "His faith must save him; his own, and not anothers, not his parents faith, though he be son of holy parents, not the Churches faith [. . .] but his own personall faith" (Donne 1953–1962, 10: 88).

The public as well as personal risk of, and need for, choice in matters of religion and love marks the moment of Donne's poetic production. It is intricately connected with the mode of dissemination, which has been called the "best and most ambitious example of author-publication" in early modern England (Love 1987, 138): circulating his poems in manuscript among a coterie (cf. Marotti 1986, Smith 2014) rather than having them printed allowed Donne, to a certain extent, to keep control over the reception of his work and make sure that employing "the codes of paradox and irony shared by the social circles he inhabited" (Adlington 2011, 725) did not lead to dangerous reactions. Still, this does not quite agree with the claim that Donne "carelesly scattered" his early love poetry (Walton 1640, sig. $B4^{r}$), which suggests another dichotomy: recklessness going along with restraint. Nor does Donne's author-publication diminish the quality of paradox and irony, as can nowhere be better seen than in the *Songs and Sonnets*.

2 Basic Coordinates: Central Topics and Concerns

The central topic of the *Songs and Sonnets* is love. But what that means is a moot point. Donne, as a rule, escapes the coordinates of Petrarchist (counter-)discourses by which so much of early modern English love poetry can be mapped (cf. Koppenfels 1967, Dubrow 1995). He even outwits modern (neo-)historicist critics who have been struck by the idea that love poetry is not about love at all but about patronage and worldly promotion, for he succeeds, by presenting love *as love*, in showing it to be a subject that enables the speaker to address all aspects of life. Instead of a poetics of praise, Donne constantly presents explorations and

evaluations of the relationship between lovers that range from reckless cynicism (like the hunting metaphor in "Love's Diet") to the description of a transcendent union (like the "love refined" communicating in "souls' language" in "The Ecstasy"; Donne 2010, 174, ll. 21, 22).

The subject of love is a prime example of the dichotomies, paradoxes and ambiguities that are the hallmark of Donne's poetry. Whenever Donne has his speaker raise the issue of love, he draws attention to the fact that love exists as an object of language and communication. Love as an act is brought up and alluded to in the *Songs and Sonnets* – arguably, Donne was the first to use the word "sex" in its modern sense in "The Primrose" (Donne 2010, 236, l. 16) – but love as a feeling, attitude and state of existence is what is being said about it. Thus, in "A Lecture upon the Shadow" (Donne 2010, 205–207) the speaker right from the start strikes a pose by presenting himself as a communicator on the topic of love: "Stand still, and I will read to thee / A lecture, love, in love's philosophy" (205, ll. 1–2). Both the external and (in all likelihood) the internal listener of this lecturer, however, are going to be disappointed if they expect an expostulation in the vein of Leone Ebreo's *Philosophy of Love* (see Sharrock 1972, 47–48). The imperative tone and the evocation of a scholastic genre in the context of love tell the reader at once that something is amiss. The command "stand still" is pragmatically ambiguous, since, being uttered as the opening words of a poem, they could both refer to the reader and to an internal addressee. The first is evoked by their similarity to inscriptions on Latin (and vernacular) epitaphs which ask the passer-by to stand still and read. An example of this *hospes resiste* tombstone formula is found in Seneca's *Epistulae morales*, a popular line surely well known to Donne and the readers of his manuscripts: "Hospes resiste et sophian Dossenni lege" ("Pause, stranger, and read the wisdom of Dossennus"), the irony being that Dossennus is a figure associated with farce (ep. 89, Seneca 1920, 382–83).

The very evocation of the model of the epitaph turns our attention to the internal addressee, who is introduced by the word "love" in the second line (unless we assume the reader to be called "love", which is possible if it is we who are asked to "stand still"). Asking love to stand still in order to listen to some academic disquisition on the philosophy of love is as comically inappropriate as Dossennus's epitaph. One cannot love and be wise, and love never stands still: proverbial knowledge invalidates the speaker's injunction. If, as the proverb has it, *amare et sapere vix deo conceditur* ('to love and to be wise is scarcely allowed to God'; Speake 2003, 188), then this is even less allowed to the God of Love himself, who may be the addressee if "love" is read as a personification. Alternatively, the internal addressee is a beloved person (called "love") who is to be told about the nature of love ("love's philosophy"). In this case, "love" is one of several examples in the *Songs and Sonnets* where the speaker creates an addressee who never answers back but to whom the speaker imputes statements which are his or her own (perhaps most famously in the elegy "To His Mistress Going to Bed"). This ambiguous wavering

between addressing some abstract, generalized, or ideal power and a human being to whom the speaker is intimately related is an example of the dichotomic principle. The ambiguity is enhanced when the poem goes on:

> Those three hours which we've spent
> In walking here, two shadows went
> Along with us, which we ourselves produced;
> But, now the sun is just above our head,
> We do those shadows tread,
> And to brave clearness all things are reduced:
> So, while our infant love did grow,
> Disguises did, and shadows, flow
> From us and our care; but now 'tis not so.
>
> (Donne 2010, 206, ll. 3–11)

We may take these lines to be the beginning of the lecture in love's philosophy, in which case the lecture-reading itself becomes ambiguous: we can either regard lines 3ff. as a preconceived text which is now presented to the (external) addressee of lines 1–2 (in this case "we" is exclusive), or we can now see that the expressions "read" and "lecture" in ll. 1–2 were meant metaphorically, for the speaker spontaneously turns the relative positions of sun and shadows during their walk into an emblem of their love (in this case "we" is inclusive). Even though the deictics (cf. Dubrow 2015) of "here" (l. 4) and "now" (l. 5) support the inclusive reading (with an internal addressee), the exclusive reading (with an external addressee) is still possible, as the occasion (the walk) and the personal situation (the speaker's and the addressee's love) lead up to an epigrammatic lesson: "That love hath not attained the least degree / Which is still diligent lest others see" (ll. 12–13).

The difference between internal and external communication is here explicitly made the subject of the speaker's discourse: as long as love is exclusively defined as internal communication, not to be seen by others, it has not yet "attained the least degree": Paradoxically, "least" here means "high'st" (as some manuscripts have it; see Donne 2010, 206). Accordingly, the central conceit of the poem, in which the course of love is likened to the course of the sun, conveys the idea that the highest point is reached when the sun "crosses the celestial meridian, its celestial longitude is 0°" (Robbins in Donne 2010, 206). The choice of "attained" makes clear that this "least degree" is the most perfect form of love. As John Hollander has pointed out (2016, 7), the word "reduced" in this context has a positive meaning as well: "the heightening sun has led the shadows back into the condition of light [. . .] from which they emerged." By implication, love at this level no longer fears being observed by others. Elsewhere in the *Songs and Sonnets* this may appear differently. In "A Valediction Forbidding Mourning", for example, the speaker creates exclusivity by stressing that "'T'were profanation of our joys / To tell the laity our love" (Donne 2010, 258, ll. 7–8). "A Lecture upon the Shadow", however, represents another tendency in the *Songs and Sonnets*: love is presented as a private sphere and communion

that does not or should not care about the outside world or that defines itself by opposition and contrast to that social world beyond the lovers, and that even, through that contrast, may become a model or paradigm for others. Examples of this tendency include "The Sun Rising", an *aubade* in which the sun and the world are told off hyperbolically by the speaker's emphasis that "Nothing else is" (249, l. 22) except "She" and "I" (l. 21); in "The Canonization", the speaker's aggressive-defensive attitude ("For God's sake hold your tongue, and let me love!", 149, l. 1) turns into the prediction that the loving couple will be "canonized for love" (l. 36) and invoked as a "pattern" (l. 45).

Whereas the first half of "A Lecture upon the Shadow" is devoted to interpreting the past and the present, the second half is a projection from the present to the future: the shadows which were cast in front of the couple in the morning and are non-existent at noon are now expected to be cast behind the lovers who are facing the declining sun:

> Except our love at this noon stay,
> We shall new shadows make the other way.
> As th'first were made to blind
> Others, these which come behind
> Will work upon ourselves, and blind our eyes.
> If once love faint, and westwardly decline,
> To me thou falsely thine,
> And I to thee mine actions shall disguise:
> The morning shadows wear away,
> But these grow longer all the day.
> But oh, love's day is short if love decay!
>
> Love is a growing or full constant light,
> And his first minute after noon is night.
> (Donne 2010, 206–207, ll. 14–26)

Just like in the first part of the poem, the lecture, expressed by the final couplet, is based on an emblematic interpretation of the lovers' movement from East to West, even though in ll. 14–24 the "here" and "now" of their walk is replaced by the speaker's immediate focus on its allegorical interpretation. The sun is a flexible vehicle, as it represents the declining course of love just as it provides the physical occasion for the speaker to dwell on the lovers' shortcomings: the lovers' blindness (to each other) and ensuing mutual deceit find their equivalent in the degree of the sun's position; now it is its astronomical position rather than the sun itself that gives rise to the comparison. Looking into the light of the setting sun is blinding; this is not the blinding intensity of love, however, which is why the blindness is metonymically ascribed to the shadows cast behind the lovers.

The actual lesson derived from the comparison is a radical and desperate one, reminiscent of (or foreshadowing) the exclamation by the speaker at the end of Shakespeare's sonnet 116, who has claimed that love does not alter with the "brief

hours and weeks" of time: "If this be error and upon me proved, / I never writ, nor no man ever loved" (Shakespeare 2016, 2866–67, ll. 11, 13–14). Donne's poem, in a similarly absolute and desperate speech act, provides a counterpart to this when the speaker claims that time (i.e. the sun) must come to a stop at its zenith if love is to continue to exist. The two temporalities of the poem, marked by the lovers' movement and the movement of the sun, must be dissociated. The lovers' time only goes on if love's time stands still. Seen in this light, the opening injunction "Stand still" now gains a fuller meaning: it makes sense to regard it as being addressed to love itself, represented by the sun, who is to stand still and listen to the lecture in love's philosophy. For only if it stands still does the lecture not end in despair. The only way to achieve the impossible is to communicate: riveting the listener's attention by the rhetorical effort is the speech act that will make come to pass what it is about. Time and love itself must stop and listen if love is to be constant. In this way, Donne has his speaker implicitly prove that love is a matter of discourse.

In turning the personal experience into a general truth, "A Lecture upon the Shadow" shows the appropriateness of distinguishing between (biographical) poet and speaker, not because the poet's life is irrelevant to the *Songs and Sonnets* but because the meaning of the speech acts is never to be confined by any biographical reference. When Donne puns on his own name or the name of his wife, for example, the biographical allusion enhances the rhetorical energy of the utterance: the line "He that hath all can have no more" in "Love's All / Love's Infiniteness" (Donne 2010, 211, l. 24) may wittily undercut the prodigality of the speaker by allowing "more" to be read as an allusion to a family name, but the reference becomes mere grist for the poet's rhetorical mill and acts as a foil to the speaker's transcending a topical image of love: "But we will have a way more liberal / Than changing hearts: to join them; so we shall / Be one, and one another's All" (ll. 31–33).

The identity of the speaker is variable and contributes to the pragmatic meaning of the poetic utterances. In "Break of Day", for example, the (probably) female speaker asks "him": "Must business thee from hence remove?" (Donne 2010, 142, l. 12, 13; cf. Warnke 1987, 45). The epigrammatic ending, reminiscent of the technique employed in "A Lecture upon the Shadow", is supported by the speaker's gender role: "He which hath business and makes love doth do / Such wrong as when a married man doth woo" (Donne 2010, 143, ll. 17–18). In "The Message", the speaker could be male or female in their cynical attack on their significant other; he or she wishes to have his/her "long-strayed eyes" (221, l. 1) and heart back in order to joy at seeing the addressee in the same miserable situation as the speaker is now: "And dost languish / For someone / That will none, / Or prove as false as thou art now" (ll. 21–24). But the cynicism frequently undercuts itself, exposing the speaker's attitude as vulnerable, questionable, or simply ridiculous. There is, for example, the mock-revenge tragedy of "The Apparition", in which the speaker casts his female addressee as murderess and himself as ghost revenging her rejection of his solicitations, but then admits that his own "love is spent" (132, l. 15), which

suggests that he is just projecting his own fallibility onto the addressee. Similarly, in "Community" and "The Indifferent", the speaker exhibits his fallibility (Haskin 2011, 202), presenting, in the first, a 'logical' argument about the moral indifference of women in order to establish that "all all may use" (Donne 2010, 156, l. 12) and, in the second, himself as an indiscriminate lover who "can love any – so she be not true" (202, l. 9). In the latter poem, the speaker's claim is followed by Venus's reaction, which makes us realize the motivation for it. She hears the speaker's song, "And by love's sweetest part, variety, she swore, / She heard not this till now" (203, 20–21): variety is claimed to be the common denominator of sexual choice and aesthetics.

"Love's Usury" again shows the absurdity of the speaker's desire when he asks the God of Love to let him strike a deal with him like a Faustian pact with the devil: he asks love to spare him until he is old and "let [his] body reign" (Donne 2010, 219, l. 5) in the meantime. Such a desired life entails total forgetfulness as he also asks Love, for example, to make him think he has never before met "last year's relict" (l. 7). This perverse wish for a mindless and loveless life of the body which the speaker will bear "though she be / One that loves me" (ll. 23–24) is perhaps the most striking example in the *Songs and Sonnets* of a discourse in which the reader is clearly not meant to be persuaded by the speaker's argument but in which the argument is calculated to make the reader react to the speaker with a shake of the head (and thus, for example, to assume the perspective of the woman referred to).

Casting Love in the role of the devil or death who is not to fetch him before he has reached old age is a variant of the connection between love and death, or even their identity, which is as central to the *Songs and Sonnets* as is the subject of love itself (Leimberg 1996, 128–29). This connection is not only made when the lovers are envisaged as dead, as in "The Ecstasy" where the souls "negotiate" while "We like sepulchral statues lay" (Donne 2010, 174, ll. 17, 18) – a scene reminiscent of the ending of *Romeo and Juliet* (Bauer and Zirker 2013, 26). It is also made through acts of speech. Two kinds of these speech acts are predominant in the *Songs and Sonnets*: paradoxical and impossible situations of communication, in which the speaker him- or herself is dead (cf. Robbins in Donne 2010, 208), and acts of leave-taking, "Valedictions", in which death is overcome by language.

"A Lecture upon the Shadow" alludes to the first kind of speech act when the speaker assumes the voice of an epitaph and asks the passer-by to "Stand still" (l. 1). Donne repeatedly turns the convention of a speaking epitaph into actually having the dead person speak from the grave (or as a ghost, as in "The Computation" and "The Expiration"). A foremost example is his verse letter to the Countess of Bedford in which he includes an epitaph on himself (Donne 2010, 719) that takes up and transforms the tradition of epitaphs reminding their readers that they will be what its speaker is now, i.e. dead (Bauer and Zirker 2013, 29–30). In the verse letter, the speaker tells his readers the opposite: "thou / In my grave's inside see what thou art now" (Donne 2010, 719, ll. 9–10). He reminds them of their own (moral) state of

death in their lives when "souls become worm-eaten carcasses" (720, l. 16). The speaker draws attention to his becoming, in death, identical with his speech when he, being turned to earth, punningly asks his readers, "think me well composed" (l. 23). In the *Songs and Sonnets*, the speaker repeatedly appears as a dead person. This is the main paradox of "The Paradox", for example, in which love and death are equated: "Once I loved and died; and am now become / Mine epitaph and tomb" (Donne 2010, 232, ll. 17–18). Playing on the double sense of "lie", the speaker finally maintains "Love-slain, lo, here I lie" (ll. 19–20), referring both to the scene of his death and the space of the poem. While there is a sense of lying when speaking not of actual death but of the metaphorical death of the sexual act (as in "The Prohibition", where the speaker threatens to die "at once" so that the addressee's "love by my death frustrate be"; 238, ll. 6, 7), there is a stronger sense of imaginatively and discursively anticipating a state of death, which allows for the expression of a love that transcends death. An example is "The Relic", where the speaker, imagining his own grave being "broke up again", makes the relic of "[a] bracelet of bright hair about the bone" expressive of the union of the loving couple still existing "at the last, busy day" (240–41, ll. 1, 6, 10).

Not only in the "Valediction" poems and in the *aubades* does leave-taking become the occasion for a discourse that addresses the connection of love and death and the hope for overcoming the latter. In "Sweetest love, I do not go", for example, leave-taking is deliberately enacted as a way to overcome death by fiction: "But since that I / Must die at last, 'tis best / To use myself in jest: / Thus by feigned deaths to die" (Donne 2010, 250, ll. 5–8). "The Legacy" also plays on the paradoxical notion of death as a repeated event: "When I died last (and, dear, I die / As often as from thee I go)" (208, ll. 1–2). The biblical allusion to 1 Cor 15:31 ("I die daily") evokes the context of trust in the resurrection of the dead, which also figures in "A Valediction: Of my Name in the Window." In this poem, the speaker stresses that "Since I die daily" the addressee will "daily mourn" for him (267, l. 42). Apart from the conceit of the name firmly engraved into the glass, it is the beloved herself that will ensure death is overcome, for the speaker's return will mean the resurrection of his "scattered body" (206, l. 32), which is possible since "all my souls be / Imparadised in you" (ll. 25–26).

The paradox of a physical as well as transcendent union between human beings that is created by leave-taking and the verbal acts involved in it is played out again and again in the *Songs and Sonnets*. Since these acts are constantly represented as utterances by speakers of varying identity, the utterances in which they appear, i.e. the language of the poems themselves and its form, call for attention. For if the poems are speeches by fictional characters, the poetic form in which those speeches are presented is where the poet's hand becomes visible. Sometimes, as in "The Indifferent", the speakers themselves are aware that they have spoken a poem (or a 'song' or a 'lecture') but even in these cases, as a rule, the expression of that awareness takes place within a poetic form of which the speakers are unaware.

3 Aesthetics: Literary Strategies

The performative enactment and, occasionally, the ironic subversion of content by form shows that, in Donne's *Songs and Sonnets*, any separation of topics and concerns on the one hand and formal and aesthetic strategies on the other is an artificial one. In "The Indifferent", the final couplets of all three stanzas have the same rhyming words, "you" and "true", but their order is reversed in the third stanza to "true" and "you", the sameness and change reflecting the clash of constancy and variety the poem is about. Whereas the speaker claims to fear the constancy of women ("Must I [. . .] / Grow your fixed subject because you are true?", Donne 2010, 203, ll. 17–18), he ironically becomes the "fixed subject" of a woman, Venus, who is constant in her adherence to variety. This clash can also be seen in the stanza form itself, which combines irregular line lengths (4-6-6-5-4-4-5-5-5 stresses) with a varying rhyme pattern (abbacccdd) but stays the same in all three stanzas. The very word "subject" suggests a political subtext to the poem, which is also evoked by the lines "Poor heretics in love there be / Which think t'establish dang'rous constancy" (ll. 24–25). This has been seen as a reference to those who stay constant to the old religion, Roman Catholicism, and are therefore regarded as a political danger (Robbins in Donne 2010, 203). The connotations do not turn the poem into a statement about the politics of religion but they include religion and politics with love in the fields where, as the form suggests, variety and constancy are at odds with each other – a topic of great concern also in the Mutability Cantos of *The Faerie Queene* (↗ 17 Edmund Spenser, *The Faerie Queene*). The artistic form which unites them may thus undercut the speaker's attitude and in itself become a statement of how to cope with such a desperate situation and such a questionable speaker aesthetically.

In "The Computation", another leave-taking poem in which the speaker describes her/his reaction to the addressee's departure, the form also provides what the speaker does not or cannot expressly say. S/he begins with a paradox, "For the first twenty years, since yesterday / I scarce believed thou couldst be gone away" (Donne 2010, 157–58, ll. 1–2), that is indicative of the speaker's subjective perception of time. In the following lines, the perceived time since yesterday is hyperbolically extended to "A thousand" (l. 6) and even "a thousand more" (l. 8) years, a lengthening of time which at the same time means complete concentration, "all being one thought of you" (l. 7), and then forgetfulness ("forgot that too"; l. 8). Thus it remains open if the speaker's final self-description, that s/he is a "ghost" who, "being dead", is "immortal" (l. 10), expresses constancy of attachment or death and annihilation. Implicitly, the speaker has threatened the addressee with forgetting him/her after a day. But then the rhetorical question to which the poem leads up, "I / Am by being dead immortal – can ghosts die?" (ll. 9–10), is a comical way of telling the addressee that the speaker cannot live without him/her. The poem's form is made to comment on the speaker's reaction to her/his loss by the poet choosing a number, ten, as its basic

component (ten lines of ten syllables) that is primarily associated with eternity (Robbins in Donne 2010, 158; Meyer and Suntrup 1987, 591). It serves, within the framework of the poetic construct, as an objective correlative to the speaker's expression of loss and subjective stretching of time.

The title, "The Computation", may not be Donne's own but it points to the importance of numbers not only on the level of content but also on the level of form. The poem is not just about a computation; it is a computation. The contribution of numbers to the meaning of this poem allows us to consider them in other poems as well. The assumption that the coherent form of "The Indifferent" is an aesthetic counterpart to the instability of content is confirmed, for example, by its arrangement of lines ($3 \times 9 = 27$), which can be taken as a reference to the Platonic Lambda, the series of numbers mentioned in the *Timaeus* (36a) as guiding the creation of the cosmic soul and suggesting harmony and stability (as it indicates the cube; see Butler 1970, 14–15). Christopher Butler, for example, points out that Donne was familiar with Francesco Giorgio's *Harmonia Mundi* (1525), "an elaborate Christianized version of the Platonic order of creation in the *Timaeus*" (Butler 1970, 56).

In "A Valediction Forbidding Mourning", Donne employs numbers to confirm and substantiate the speaker's message of hope, which s/he has made evident by comparing the distant lovers to the legs of a pair of compasses whose movements stay connected: "Thy firmness makes my circle just, / And makes me end where I begun" (Donne 2010, 262, 35–36). The justness or completion of the circle is confirmed by the number of lines, 36, whose significance can also be traced back to the *Timaeus* (39d) and the complete return of the celestial bodies to their original position (Robbins in Donne 2010, 262; Freccero 1963, 355). In this poem, the speaker's and addressee's love is expressly addressed as a secret connection, a secrecy that is mimed by formal devices such as the similarity of sound. An example is the word for hope itself, *spes*, which is explained by Isidore in his *Etymologiae* as "quasi 'est pes'"; it is, so to speak, a foot with which to proceed (*vocata quod sit pes progrediendi*; Isidore 1911, 8.2.5, qtd. in Bauer 1995, 109). The fact that both feet of the pair of compasses move is thus linguistically confirmed to be a sign of hope ("Thy soul, the fixed foot, makes no show / To move, but doth if th'other do"; Donne 2010, 260, ll. 27–28).

Form here becomes an essential part of the message and contributes to the overall strategy of communicating by showing acts of communication. If we regard the formal aspects of a poem at least partly as the poet's presentation of the speaker's communication, they allow the poet mimetically to reinforce the speaker's words or to counteract them. This applies more clearly to the numerical and numerological aspects of the poem than to the metaphors, which frequently appear as the speaker's own. In "A Lecture upon the Shadow", for example, the lecturer's words "Except our love at this noon stay" (Donne 2010, 206, l. 14) occur in the middle of the poem, which is clearly the poet's rather than the lecturer's iconic device by which he signals his control. The central conceit is the speaker's, who allegorically

interprets their walking westward while the sun moves from behind to before them and the shadows from before to behind them. The poet here comes in by having his speaker present the conceit in such a way that it is at odds with the speaker's message: her/his wish to envisage love as "a growing or full constant light" (207, l. 25) is counteracted by the conceit which suggests the inexorable decline the speaker desperately wishes to prevent. The reader in this case must either regard the speaker's chosen conceit as inappropriate or regard it as a way to suggest, pessimistically, that enduring love is impossible.

As a result, Donne's aesthetics of the conceit appears to be more challenging than it might at first appear. There is not only the game of wit, to be matched by the reader's discovery of the appropriateness of far-fetched metaphors and similes, such as the speaker's metaphorically becoming a fever in the last stanza of "The Fever". There is also the need to consider the use and function of the conceit as a communicative device, as "A Lecture upon the Shadow" has shown. In "A Valediction Forbidding Mourning" there is both: the employment of catachresis can be seen as the appropriate means of expressing the connection between the remote lovers (Ettenhuber 2011, 410). This goes together with the appropriateness of a higher order, however, as the pair of compasses turn out to be a meta-conceit, representing the function of the conceit itself, which connects a tenor to a vehicle even when they shift. The flea in "The Flea" is an example of such a shifting connection, as the speaker uses it wittily for various (in this case even opposing) metaphorical purposes. In "The Legacy", we are similarly invited to reflect on the use of metaphor as a way of aestheticizing interpersonal relationships when the conventional metaphor of the exchange of hearts is literalized in a postmortem anatomical scene.

Donne's conceits in the *Songs and Sonnets* repeatedly dwell on aspects of the body, ranging from the wish to be killed and dissected by Love at the end of "Love's Exchange" to the metaphor of the body as a book to which the lovers must return from their spiritual ecstasy in "The Ecstasy" so that "Weak men on love revealed may look" (Donne 2010, 181, l. 70), for "the body is his [i.e. Love's] book" (l. 72). This shows that the body serves as a medium linking form and materiality to content and ideas, and it also provides a clue to the aesthetic conception of *Songs and Sonnets* as a whole.

Not only do the *Songs and Sonnets* not comprise any sonnets but they also, as a group, formally present a counter-model to the sonnet and to sonnet sequences. While the sonnet repeats and, within strict limitations, modulates an inherited form, and the sonnet sequence frequently tells a story (like Sidney's *Astrophil and Stella*; or at least presents several groups that are linked by narrative, like Shakespeare's sonnets), Donne's *Songs and Sonnets* do neither: each of them has an individual form, and they do not cohere and tell a story.

The fact that none one of them has the same form as any of the others is shared by two other collections of verse which are thus, perhaps surprisingly, related to them, the one as a formal model for Donne, the other as a response to the *Songs*

and Sonnets: the Psalms translated into English verse by Sir Philip and Mary Sidney (Sidney 2009), and George Herbert's *The Temple* (1633). Formal variety is the hallmark of both, with the Sidneys repeating only two stanza forms among the 171 different texts comprising the Psalter (Niefer 2018, 299–300) and Herbert, with the exception of a few sonnets, shaping each poem individually. Donne acknowledged the influence of the Sidneys' poetic masterpiece in his poem "Upon the Translation of the Psalms by Sir Philip Sidney and the Countess of Pembroke his Sister", in which he praises it for content and form: "They tell us why, and teach us how to sing" (Donne 2010, 581, l. 22).

The formal connection between the *Songs and Sonnets* and the Sidneys' and Herbert's religious poetry shows that there is a deeper aesthetic link which transcends the secular/religious divide. It may be called an aesthetics of individuation expressed by the formal individuality of each poem. Through this individuality, the poem on the page and in the ear becomes recognizable as the body in which its idea is realized. Individual variety, while part of the witty discourse on love, makes it possible for the form to become iconic and thus enter into a dialogue with the speaker's discourse. In particular, the union and dichotomy of love and death characteristic of the *Songs and Sonnets* thus become embodied in the lines of Donne's verse. It does so nowhere more beautifully than in "Sweetest love, I do not go", a poem in which the speaker enacts her/his departure as a "feigned" death (Donne 2010, 250, l. 8) in order to defeat the actual one. The common metre of the first four lines of each stanza is followed by a 2-4-4-3 stress pattern of the last four lines, which entails prose-like rhythmical flexibility. This allows Donne to play out line endings against syntactic units and create an ambiguity that enacts the double vision of a worldly and transcendent union. The epigrammatic ending, "They who one another keep / Alive, ne'er parted be" (251, ll. 39–40) can be read, when giving preference to the line break, as an assurance that mutual care will ensure that the lovers will stay together until they die. If the line break is disregarded, the speaker and the poem convey the message that never-ending life itself is within the power of the lovers.

4 Reception and Theoretical Perspectives

The reception of Donne's *Songs and Sonnets* can be accessed through three indispensable scholarly endeavours: A. J. Smith's collection of earlier response in the *Critical Heritage* series (Smith 1983), John R. Roberts's annotated bibliographies (Roberts 1973, 1982, 2004, 2013; reaching up to 2008), and the *General and Topical Commentary* volume on the *Songs and Sonnets* in the *Donne Variorum* (2017). They are supplemented by individual articles reviewing criticism (such as Sharrock 1972) as well as special studies, such as Dayton Haskin's (2007) on the nineteenth century.

The critical response to the *Songs and Sonnets* reflects the dichotomic principle as they have attracted, over the centuries, more outspoken critique (and its opposite, intense praise) than most other English collections of verse. Sometimes this can be found combined in one person, as in the case of Ben Jonson, who, as William Drummond of Hawthornden reports, "esteemeth John Done the first poet in the World in some things" while at the same time affirming "that Done for not keeping of accent deserved hanging" (qtd. in Smith 1983, 69). This critique, though apparently directed at the *Anniversaries*, written to commemorate Elizabeth Drury, might also be occasioned by the deliberate metrical and rhythmical flexibility that marks poems like "Sweetest love, I do not go" (see Cooper 2009 on Donne's intonational flexibility). It goes together with Jonson's expectation "that Done himself for not being understood would perish" (qtd. in Smith 1983, 70). The positive version of this latter judgement is to be found in Jonson's poem "To John Donne", in which he claims that "Phœbus, and each *Muse*, / [. . .] to thy one, all other braines refuse" (in Smith 1983, 67). The common denominator of these statements is that Donne was a poet of thought, a brilliant wit and intellectual who disregarded the art of mellifluous verse-making and who, accordingly, was difficult to understand.

This judgment still makes itself heard in John Dryden's much-quoted statement in his *Discourse Concerning the Original and Progress of Satire* (1693) that Donne "affects the Metaphysicks, not only in his Satires, but in his Amorous Verses, where Nature only shou'd reign; and perplexes the Minds of the Fair Sex with nice Speculations of Philosophy, when he shou'd ingage their hearts, and entertain them with the softnesses of Love" (qtd. in Smith 1983, 151). From a neoclassicist point of view, Dryden rejected Donne's versification but he praised his "Variety, Multiplicity, and Choice of Thoughts" (151). In the eighteenth century, it was Samuel Johnson who continued in this vein in his *Life of Cowley* (1779), taking up Dryden's and Alexander Pope's notion of Donne as a "metaphysical" poet: "The metaphysical poets were men of learning, and to shew their learning was their whole endeavour" (Johnson in Smith 1983, 217); at the same time, he follows his predecessors in complaining that their "modulation was [. . .] imperfect" (217). About the pair of compasses in "A Valediction Forbidding Mourning" he memorably "doubted whether absurdity or ingenuity has the better claim" (230). About metaphysical wit in general he observed that it may be considered "a kind of *discordia concors* [. . .] a discovery of occult resemblances in things apparently unlike. [. . .] The most heterogeneous ideas are yoked by violence together" (218). As Haskin (2011, 189) observes, there is nothing in Johnson's remarks to suggest that "he glimpsed the gestalt within which the compass imagery contributes to the drawing of the circle." In the history of Donne criticism, it was Coleridge who realized that the conceits were not to be regarded in isolation; his 1811 annotations to Donne's "The Canonization" in Charles Lamb's copy of Donne's poems show his great delight in "tracing the leading thought throu'out the whole" (qtd. in Smith 1983, 268; cf. Haskin 2011, 189).

The notions and views thus raised in the first 200 years of Donne criticism were to remain influential during the second 200 years: the role of wit and thought and the question of their relation to feelings and emotions; branching out from this, the role of 'metaphysical' issues and the nature of Donne's metaphors, as well as the role of women as readers (and as topics of discourse, as speakers and addressees). As to the first, T. S. Eliot's influential essay on "The Metaphysical Poets" (1921) took up what Herbert Grierson (1921) had stressed in the preface to his anthology, namely that these poets achieved "a peculiar blend of passion and thought": "Tennyson and Browning are poets, and they think; but they do not feel their thought as immediately as the odour of a rose. A thought to Donne was an experience" (Eliot 1951, 287). Ironically, the famous "dissociation of sensibility" (288) that Eliot diagnosed as taking place *after* Donne and the other metaphysical poets seems quite similar to what Dryden and others had at least implicitly noted in Donne when they missed feeling going together with thought. Eliot, however, focuses on the emotional quality of thought itself, a quality of which Donne is aware when he, for example, has his speaker lecture on love's philosophy by describing an experience.

Correspondingly, experience and feeling in Donne are frequently represented as thought, most strikingly when discordant experiences are related conceptually and expressed by simile and metaphor. This process has been reconsidered and contextualized time and again in the criticism triggered by Johnson's observation of *discordia concors*. It can be seen, for example, in a recent empirical study of the bidirectionality of Donne's metaphors in the *Songs and Sonnets*, which "enable both embodied simulation and bodily feeling" (Goodblatt and Glicksohn 2017, 163). Earlier, the concept of *discordia concors* influenced the scholarly discussions of wit and paradox that link Donne's secular and religious works from the perspective of a "poetic of correspondence" (Mazzeo 1964; see also Martz 1969, Wanamaker 1975). These discussions have taken up and extended the emphasis given to paradox by New Criticism (Brooks 1947; cf. Müller 1992), not necessarily a limiting approach despite the cultural and political de-contextualization of many such readings, as when William Empson speaks of "the single mood of the poem" in relation to Shakespeare's sonnet 17 and Donne's "A Valediction: Of Weeping" (Empson 2004, 138). At any rate, discussions of the conceit suggest that the relation of Donne's love lyrics to religion is not just that of a profane parody (as Crennan 1979 maintains).

The much-discussed roles of women in Donne's *Songs and Sonnets* in many ways link up with the social and media history of the poems' production and dissemination. Awareness of their early circulation increased with Griersons's manuscript-based edition (Donne 1912). In the wake of Marotti's work on Donne as a "coterie poet" (1986), it has been pointed out that this does not mean that the *Songs and Sonnets* were written for an all-male club; Flynn (1989) even suggests that many of them were written for a female audience, while Starza Smith (2014, 16)

argues that "a less pithy but more accurate rendering [. . .] of 'coterie poet' is 'poet who tried to restrict his readership'. When he sent poems to one friend, they were designed to reach that friend, except on the few known occasions when he asked one individual to pass on a poem to another." Erin A. McCarthy (2018) has recently shown by a quantitative analysis of verse miscellanies that Donne's early readership consisted to a large extent of women, aristocratic as well as non-aristocratic. Answers to the question of Donne's misogyny must clearly take into account the original audience; it seems much easier to distinguish author from assumed (sometimes misogynist) speaker if a female audience is assumed. Still, Theresa DiPasquale asks (2011, 679), "how often can you enact such 'odious' attitudes before you become the creep you meant to mock?" This question remains current in Donne criticism, even though professional actors would reject it as inappropriate, and even though DiPasquale herself supplements it by asking "how often one may claim that certain Women are exceptions to the rule before one demonstrates one's actual rejection of the rule" (682).

Undoubtedly, the disparagement of women by Donne's speakers belongs to the most provocative aspects of the *Songs and Sonnets* and cannot be removed from the communicative setting in which those speakers perform their roles. Frank J. Warnke (1987, 45) has stressed "the radically dramatic and fictive nature of Donne's approach as a lyric poet." This includes "forms of gender ambiguity" that are, as Gina Filo (2016, 3) points out, depicted in the *Songs and Sonnets* with "a sense of imaginative play and delight." If Low (1993, 33) is right and "Donne was a chief actor and influence in what may be called the 'reinvention of love'", this does not only comprise, as Low maintains, the change "from something essentially social and feudal to something essentially private and modern" (33) but also the performative (see, e.g., Müller 2010, Fetzer 2010, Zirker 2019) testing of changing identities. This need not be a sign of epistemological uncertainty (cf. Otto 2014, 254) but may overcome this uncertainty by making it the subject of play and poetic form.

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Guibbory, Achsah, ed. *The Cambridge Companion to John Donne*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006.
Ray, Robert H. *A John Donne Companion*. 1990. Abingdon: Routledge, 2014.