

Contemplating Paradoxical Doctrine Through Formal Structure in the Holy Sonnets

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Abstract

This paper discusses the relationship between form and function within John Donne's Holy Sonnets. It engages scholars such as Gardner, Kuchar, and Low who have examined the Sonnets as a means to understand various aspects of Christian doctrine, some contemplating the content and others examining the formal structure of the Sonnets. This paper argues that the specific sonnet form that Donne uses, as opposed to other traditional poetic forms, is especially effective at communicating paradoxes in Christian doctrine. The research method takes place in three steps. First, the paper briefly engages other scholars who maintain that paradoxes within Christian doctrine are effectively contemplated within the Sonnets. Second, the paper identifies the specific form that Donne utilizes throughout his collection of sonnets. This investigation reveals that Donne consistently uses a combination of the Petrarchan and the Shakespearean sonnet, with the octave following the Petrarchan form and the sestet combining the Petrarchan sestet with the Shakespearian couplet. In this, the paper anticipates how characteristics of these forms might generally function to communicate complex messages. For instance, two lines with seemingly incompatible ideas might be held neatly together by an envelope rhyme, or the opposition might be emphasized even further within a couplet. Finally, the paper closely examines the sonnets "Oh, to vex me" and "Batter my heart," identifying how the form of each composes their paradoxical content. The implications of this study are important for the genre of religious poetry because modern poets often forgo traditional form in favor of free verse as a means of grasping complex ideas. This paper illustrates the value of traditional form for conveying complex ideas, particularly for poems with spiritual content.

Keywords: Poetic Form, Christian Doctrine, Holy Sonnets

1. Introduction

*"The point that I want to make is that
there are effects available to traditionally formal
poems that aren't available to other forms."*
-Christian Wiman
(*Ambition and Survival: Becoming a Poet*)

Christian doctrine is full of paired contradictions, or paradoxes. The kingdom has come and is yet to come, worldly death precurses eternal life, a prisoner for the Lord is completely free, and the finality of grace joins our continued existence in a temporary world of sin. These paradoxes make Christian doctrine hard to grasp. But the Holy Sonnets expertly handle such difficulties. Perhaps this is why Donne's work has endured over centuries and continues to be deemed "holy," timelessly invoking analysis and response by countless scholars and theologians.

In his essay, "Donne's Wit of Redemption: The Drama of Prayer in the Holy Sonnets," John N. Wall, Jr. claims, "The subject of Donne's Holy Sonnets is ... an exploration of the paradoxes of the Christian life on earth."¹ Gergius,

Hamilton, and Low have also recognized paradoxes in the divine meditations.² Wall notices the complexity of the subject matter in the sonnets, and proceeds to evaluate the speaker's circular spiritual journey throughout the series: from hope towards despair and from despair back towards hope. He then relates this dynamic movement to an "understanding of the Christian life."³ I will take a slightly different approach, agreeing that the Holy Sonnets reveal "paradoxes of the Christian life on earth," but stepping away from the spiritual journey of the speaker to explore how the individual sonnets wrestle with paradoxical elements of Christian doctrine in regards to their form.

My aim is to reveal how the Holy Sonnets successfully contemplate the paradoxes of Christian doctrine through their distinctive structure as sonnets. First I will describe the traditional sonnet forms and explore the unique characteristics of the form that Donne chooses to use in his Holy Sonnets. Then I will attempt to show how this form aids the speaker's expression of complex doctrine in the Holy Sonnets. This will be accomplished by analyzing the effects of formal characteristics, such as rhyme scheme, grouping, turns, and meter, in the Holy Sonnets "Oh, to vex me" and "Batter my heart." By grasping the effectiveness of the sonnet form to communicate Christian doctrine, we may become more empowered to understand the mysteries of Christian doctrine. We may also gain an appreciation and respect for traditional poetic form.

2. Literature Review

Scholars widely agree that John Donne's Holy Sonnets effectively communicate certain elements of Christian Doctrine. Although critics disagree about which denomination Donne belongs to, they all tend to believe that the Holy Sonnets reveal something worthwhile about Christian spirituality. Helen Gardner argues in *Divine Poems* that the Sonnets "form a sequence [of]... meditations, in what was originally a Catholic, even a specifically Ignatian, mode."⁴ Luiz Marts also believes that the Holy Sonnets have a strong Catholic influence in his *Poetry of Meditation*.⁵ On the other hand, "Halewood and Lewalski have argued that Donne's meditative method is not Catholic after all, but Protestant."⁶ Anthony Low indicates that the Holy Sonnets reveal ideology from distinct Protestant, Catholic, Calvinist, Jesuit, and Presbyterian backgrounds.⁷ In any case, the Holy Sonnets convey something worthwhile about the mystery of Christian doctrine, or else they would not provoke so much attention. Their relatability to multiple denominations may even indicate that the Donne rises above the traditional categories and conveys doctrine which is common to all of Christianity.

Some scholars try to pinpoint specific aspects of theology in the Holy Sonnets. For example, Gary Kuchar discusses repentance, and Anthony Low discusses the absence of sacraments in relation to spiritual disconnectedness.⁸ Others, such as John N. Wall Jr., discuss the meditative pattern and spiritual journey of the speaker.⁹ Still others analyze *how* the Holy Sonnets convey Christian ideology. For example, Laura Gerigius discusses the effects of syntax and grammar in *John Donne's Holy Sonnet 10*.¹⁰ However, no one has addressed the characteristic form of the Holy Sonnets. Why are all of Donne's divine meditations *sonnets*? Would Holy Haikus or Holy Free Verse have the same effect? Or is the sonnet structure particularly useful for communicating the complexities of Christian doctrine? In order to respond to this query, one must consider the difficulties of understanding Christian doctrine and discover what the Holy Sonnets accomplish in regards to those difficulties.

3. Sonnet Forms

Donne uses a tight and specific form of sonnet in the Divine Meditations. In order to examine the function of this form, one must have a clear understanding of the specific structure that Donne uses. In his book *Poetic Meter and Poetic Form*, Paul Fussell devotes an entire chapter to "Structural Principles: The Example of the Sonnet." His detailed description of sonnet structure sheds light on the formal qualities of the Holy Sonnets. In general, a sonnet is a fixed, strophic form of poetry with fourteen lines written in iambic pentameter. The Petrarchan, or Italian, sonnet uses a rhyme scheme that divides the poem into an octave and a sestet. The octave contains two quatrains with identical envelope rhymes (*abba-abba*). The sestet can have varying rhyme schemes (such as *cdecde*, *cdeced*, or *cddee*).¹¹ By dividing the form into two parts, the Petrarchan sonnet introduces a turn between lines eight and nine, which is "a logical or emotional shift by which the speaker enables himself to take a new or altered or enlarged view of his subject."¹² The formation of logical turns is a particular aspect of sonnets that allows them to convey and resolve, at least partially, complex ideas and experiences such as those in Christian doctrine. In Petrarchan sonnets, the octave stages the subject in the first quatrain, and poses a conflict or complicates the subject in the second quatrain. Then the sestet finally resolves the tension.¹³ However, this is not the exact pattern for all Petrarchan sonnets, and does not

encompass the Holy Sonnets completely, because they use a mixture of the Petrarchan sonnet and the Shakespearean, or English, sonnet.

The Shakespearean sonnet is generally organized into three separate quatrains (*abab-cdcd-egef*) and then ends in a rhyming couplet (gg) which introduces the turn at line 13. This gives less room to develop a “resolution” to the problem, but can be used to introduce a paradox or put special emphasis on two lines as a capstone to the rest of the poem.¹⁴ Donne uses a very tight hybrid of the Petrarchan sonnet and the Shakespearean sonnet in the Holy Sonnets. He uses the Petrarchan octave to start, and then ends the sestet with the Shakespearean-style couplet. For example, the Holy Sonnet “Death be not proud” uses the scheme *abbaabba-cddc-ee*. The first eight lines are Petrarchan and the last six lines are a mixture of Petrarchan and Shakespearean. The only difference from one poem to another is that some use the Shakespearean pattern, rather than the envelope rhyme, in quatrain three, as in “Spit in my face yee Jewes” (*abbaabba-cdcd-ee*). However, each sonnet contains three total quatrains, a Shakespearean aspect, with a distinctly Petrarchan beginning octave and a distinctly Shakespearean ending couplet. This form is consistent throughout all of the Holy Sonnets.

The tight, calculated form that Donne uses provides an element of perfection and heightened language to his writing. Rhyme and controlled iambic meter help the composition of words sound artistic and beautiful to the reader’s ear, making sonnets a higher form of language than common speech. Therefore, the sonnets are suitable vessels for their holy subject matter. If Donne had used free verse, or had wavered from the established form, the holiness of language would have been lost. But the discussion of form must go beyond heightening language to carry divine subject matter. Otherwise, one might argue that Donne could have used the Petrarchan sonnet, the Shakespearean sonnet, or any other type of formal poetry, so long as he religiously kept to the established structure.

Donne’s particular choice of form, a mix of the Petrarchan and Shakespearean sonnet, is an excellent means of dealing with the complexities in Christian doctrine. The Holy Sonnets can use the turn at line nine, line 13, or both in order to complicate or wrestle with these complexities. With two turns instead of one, there are ample opportunities for complication, repentance, or emphasis while still keeping a completely unified form. The rhyme scheme is also exceptionally useful for juxtaposing and unifying contradictory ideas. The envelope rhymes neatly contain complex concepts. The couplets help bind individual lines to each other, providing a means to relate and, therefore, complicate subject matter within those lines. In addition, the formation of quatrains helps organize problem development throughout the sonnet as a whole. The Holy Sonnets can express paradox very efficiently and neatly through their distinct form. This is extremely important, because, as was previously noted, Christian doctrine is rife with paradoxical complexities.

4. Close Reading “Oh, to vex me”

One complexity in Christian doctrine involves inconstancy in devotion toward God. Christianity calls on mankind to recognize their own sinful nature, which makes them unable to bring themselves into a state of righteousness. Therefore, the most righteous man must be completely humble in that he does not consider himself righteous at all. Christian doctrine is of the mind that no Christian, although he has been saved, continuously acts in perfect accord with righteousness, because “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.”¹⁵ So in the depths of his devotion, a Christian must confess his own inconstancy. This is counterintuitive, because inconstancy and devotion seem to be opposites, making this aspect of Christian doctrine hard to explain. However, Donne articulates the paradox in the Holy Sonnet “Oh, to vex me” as the speaker considers his rapid flipping between devotion to God and sin:

Oh, to vex me, contraryes meete in one:
Inconstancy unnaturally hath begot
A constant habit: that when I would not
I change in vowes, and in devotione.
As humorous is my contrition
As my prophane Love, and as soone forgott:
As ridlingly distemperd, cold and hott,
As praying, as mute; as infinite, as none.
I durst not view heaven yesterday; and to day
In prayers, and flattering speaches I court God:
To morrow’I quake with true feare of his rod.
So my devout fits come and go away
Like a fantastique Argue: save that here

Those are my best dayes, when I shake with feare.¹⁶

The first quatrain establishes the speaker's problem: he is inconstant despite his better intentions to be steadfast. By beginning with "Oh, to vex me," the speaker makes his frustration evident, which alerts the reader that the following lines will present a problem. This is that inconstancy is a "constant habit ... in devotion." The use of envelope rhyme helps him articulate the nature of his problem and develop his frustration. The outside rhymes of "meete in one" and "in devotione" establish that the nature of Christian "devotione" is paradoxical. More specifically, the outside lines set the speaker up to express a Christian's inconstancy however much he desires to maintain constancy. The rhyme establishes this effectively because "contraryes meete in one" is directly related to "in devotione" with the end rhyme. So contraries meeting within a single being defines the devotional experience of a Christian. These outside lines, which define the problem, neatly frame the internal couplet in lines two and three, which would otherwise be confusing without such a tight context.

The internal lines are fraught with contradictory ideas. For example, "begot" is directly paired with "hath not" through end rhyme. These ideas are opposites, as the first is a positive expression of receiving or bearing a child within oneself, and the other is a negative expression of not having something. The rest of the lines complicate the contradiction even further, because the object that the speaker begets is actually a "constant habit" of "inconstancy." This is ironic because habits are routine actions and inconstancy is the absence of routine. By pairing "hath begot" with "when I would not" in the couplet, the unreliability of the speaker's habits is paired with his desire to be consistent from one line to the next through rhyme and close proximity, creating friction between the two ideas and engaging the speaker's frustration. Furthermore, the two "contraryes" of his condition are identified and held together because "inconstancy" (line 2) and "A constant" (line 3) appear at the beginning of the line, so their visual position matches up within the form. They are also both written in perfect iambic pentameter, so they sound the same metrically, even though they express opposite ideas. Donne uses the conventional meter of sonnets to harmonize the sound of the words and simultaneously juxtapose their meanings, making the complexity of the doctrine comprehensible to the reader. The form of the sonnet is useful in creating friction in this first quatrain, because lines two and three are bound tightly together by the enveloping lines, which describe the problem, and the rhyming of the couplet. By providing a tight form and meter with which to compare opposing ideas, the sonnet lends itself well to presenting the speaker's problem in the first quatrain.

The next quatrain expands the speaker's problem, which is a common use of the second quatrain in Petrarchan sonnets.¹⁷ Beginning line five the speaker renounces his "contritione" as something that is "humorous" or ironic. But "contritione" and "devotione" make a perfect rhyming couplet, tying the two words together and affirming the Christian belief that repentance, or contrition, is the way to righteousness, or devotion. The speaker goes on to destabilize any righteousness that might be available to him with the inconstancy of his nature. The speaker "soon forgott" his penitence, and is "cold and hott." His inconstancy makes contrition void of any real value, and is why he considers it humorous. By rhyming "forgott" with "hott", the sonnet contrasts a feeling of indifference in the former with an idea of passion in the latter, exemplifying the condition of the speaker's unreliable soul. This friction of two opposing ideas within the envelope rhyme ultimately contributes to the final outside rhyme of "none." Rhyming with "contritione" and, for that matter, "devotione", the word "none" renders these religious qualities worthless. The Petrarchan structure of the first octave once again contributes to the development of the paradox. The tightly-bound space, formed through the end rhymes, helps create friction between opposing ideas: begot versus not, praying versus mute, cold versus hot, rigid versus distempered, and infinite versus none. The relation of the first quatrain to the second quatrain through the connecting couplet, devotion and contrition, helps expand the problem as well. These formal qualities of the Holy Sonnets help Donne develop his ideas. By the end of the Petrarchan octet, the development of the problem is complete: no matter how fine the speaker's intentions are, he is incapable of being constant in his love for God, making the righteousness that he can obtain through repentance seem worthless.

At the Petrarchan turn, marked by a change in rhyme from *abba* to *cdde*, the speaker enters into a solution to his problem without yet noticing it. He begins to recognize his patterns of inconstancy in relation to God in his present moment in time, rather than just generally being frustrated. He begins referring to his view of heaven "yesterday," "to day," and "To morrow," noticing that his attitude towards God is different each time. He finally states that "my devout fits come and go away/like a fantastique Ague." The momentum of this recognition is carried through enjambment right up into the concluding couplet, which marks the strong, Shakespearean turn. This begins in the middle of line 13: "save that here / Those are my best dayes, when I shake with feare." As is common in the Shakespearean sonnets, the couplet offers a conclusion, giving finality to the sonnet, but not a full resolution to the speaker's initial problem of inconstancy. By rhyming "here" with "feare," the speaker refers only to the current moment, "here," looking neither to the past nor the future inconstancy, but recognizing only his current position as an inconstant being. Because he recognizes the present fickle nature of his soul, the speaker fears God's justice. Fear of God is also used in Christianity

to express reverence or obedience to God, so through recognizing and “shaking” with feare of his own sinful nature, the speaker actually brings himself into a station of reverence, steadfastness, and devotion. Notice that this is a paradox: shaking as a means to gain steadfastness. Steadfast evokes a sense of immovability, while one who shakes is unsteady and movable. In this case, when the speaker is moved by his fear of God, he is once again under God’s control and, therefore, exhibits the most devout relation to God in these moments. This is why he says that his “best dayes” are those in which he shakes in fear. The only way for a Christian to be devout is to recognize his sinful nature and the inconstancy of his faith.

Donne uses both turns in order to draw this conclusion in a compelling, comprehensible, and personal way. The first octave uses envelope rhymes to stage the problem. Then the first turn leads the reader to experience personal recognition of inconstancy with the speaker. The final turn brings resolution, as he decides that such recognition is the best way to guide his spirit to a state of reverence. The couplet is especially valuable for the resolution, because it is short and compact, allowing the paradox to be fully acknowledged, but with enough brevity for the speaker to hypothetically revert back to his sinful ways once the poem has ended. This is important because he will continue to be inconstant, and must continue recognizing that inconstancy in order to, once again, shake with fear in reverence before the Lord. The form of the sonnet helps develop the paradox of Christian devotion only coming through the recognition of inconstancy.

5. Close Reading “Batter my heart”

The sonnet “Batter my heart” brings complexities and paradoxes within Christian doctrine into an organized and expressive form. Once again, the sonnet conveys the speaker’s desperation to be righteous and upright before God in the midst of his incapability to do so. This sonnet differs from the former, however, because the speaker cries out in prayer, begging God to force him into a state of obedience and righteousness. The sonnet reveals the mysterious relationship of Christians to God, relating subordination and spiritual freedom:

Batter my heart, three person’d God; for, you
As yet but knocke, breathe, shine, and seeke to mend;
That I may rise, and stand, o’erthrow mee, ‘and bend
Your force, to breake, blowe, burn and make me new.
I, like an usurpt towne, to’another due,
Labour to’admit you, but Oh, to no end,
Reason your viceroy in mee, mee should defend,
But is captiv’e, and proves weake or untrue,
Yet dearely’I love you, and would be lov’d faine,
But am betroth’d unto your enemie,
Divorce mee, ‘untie, or breake that knot againe,
Take mee to you, imprison mee, for I
Except you’enthrall mee, never shall be free,
Nor ever chast, except you ravish mee.¹⁸

This prayer is full of paradoxes. The speaker asks God to force him into a state of righteousness and devotion which combines a sense of willful obedience and forced submission. Even more astonishingly, he concludes that it is only in such a state of slavery to God that the Christian can “be free.” When Lora Gerigius explains this poem in her essay “John Donne’s Holy Sonnet 10,” she claims that the Holy Sonnets commonly portray “human sinfulness as the inevitable inconsistency of a faithless human lover estranged from a beloved God” and explains how this particular sonnet exemplifies the trend.¹⁹ She agrees with other scholars, namely Lynn Hamilton, when she asserts that “John Donne’s poetry is distinguished by its … ‘exploration of paradox.’”²⁰ Gerigius proceeds to analyze how “the poem grammatically renders its thematic content of separation and connectivity.”²¹ She focuses on the syntax and grammar within the sonnet, and how these elements effectively convey the Christian experience. I agree with Gerigius that the Holy Sonnets are marked by paradox, and that this sonnet describes the “inevitable inconsistency” of the speaker. However, I wish to add to Gerigius’s grammatical argument by discussing how the sonnet structurally “renders its thematic content.”

In the first quatrain, the speaker cries for God to “batter” him into submission. Batter means “to break down or to break through by force against your opponent’s will.”²² The prayer is counterintuitive because the speaker is “requesting, or demanding, to be battered,” which “undermines the very meaning of the word.”²³ Yet the speaker

makes his request, matching his idea of God's force, which he desires, with the forcefulness of his request through the compact form of the quatrain and the intentional break from the normal iambic meter. Donne initially uses meter for emphasis when the speaker calls God "three person'd." The spondee conveys strength, emphasizing the speaker's perception of a mighty God and his desire for God to be violent in relation with him. This emphasis would have been lost if Donne had not been working with an established sonnet form. There would be no expectation for the line to be in iambic pentameter, so the spondee would have no significance to the line. Therefore, the established meter of the sonnet form helps Donne communicate the speaker's experience.

The second line informs us that God has only yet been gentle with the speaker, while the third line introduces the paradox that the speaker must be forcefully overthrown by God in order to be reconciled to him. This line is counterintuitive, because the concept of being overthrown, which causes destruction, seems to contradict the desired result for the speaker to "rise, and stand." However, the rhyming couplet of "mend" (line 2) and "bend" (line 3) helps Donne cleanly relate the paradox of the speaker's relationship with God. Through rhyme, the speaker implies that for God to be accomplished in "seek[ing] to mend" him, God must actually "bend" him. "Mend" and "bend," one an act of restoration and the other an act of violence, are coupled in order to bring about their unity and relationship to one another, adding to our understanding of the content in the rest of the lines. The outside rhymes "for you" (line 1) and "make me new" (line 4) envelope the internal couplet, emphasizing the speaker's conviction that it is by God's action, not his own, that he will be made new. Envelope rhyme cleanly communicates the speaker's complicated request and relationship to God, because the outside rhymes define his request and hold the internal couplet within this big idea. The internal couplet in turn presents paradoxes which are integral to understanding the speaker's request. Donne also uses metrical patterns to organize concepts within the first quatrain.

The use of stress in the second and fourth lines contrasts God's former actions with what the speaker desires God to do. This matching of the stress patterns is another way (rather than rhyming) to link lines together. Both lines stress the fourth, fifth, and sixth syllable, and then follow with an iambic foot, breaking up an otherwise perfectly iambic line. The effect is that the verbs "knock, breathe, shine, and seek" (line 2) and "break, blow, burn and make" (line 4) stand out within their lines in direct relationship to each other. The contrast of the gentle verbs in line two and the harsh ones in line four emphasize the speaker's desire for a radical change in the way that God relates to him. It also brings together the paradoxical nature of God: a being who is mighty and terrible, capable of destructive force, but also gentle and patient. The sonnet form is important for conveying these meanings, because it establishes a metrical pattern in which the three consecutively stressed syllables stand out, and lines them up in the same relative metrical and visual position in their respective lines. Through formal elements, the first quatrain communicates the speaker's ardent prayer and comments on the nature of God and the speaker's relationship to Him, but leaves us wondering why the speaker's request is necessary. If he really wants to be under God's will, then why would he need God to forcefully put him there?

The second quatrain answers this question by expressing the speaker's inability to fight off his own weak and sinful nature. The envelope rhyme illustrates the speaker's captivity within sin by enclosing his futile efforts in descriptions of his miserable position. The outside rhymes "to another due" and "weak and untrue" express Satan's claim on the Christian's soul and the undesirable effect that he has on the Christian's "usurped" and "captiv'd" nature. These outside lines enclose the speaker's efforts to be righteous, where he "Labour[s] ... to no end" and reason futilely tries to "defend" him against sin. The structure of the rhymes creates an artistic representation of the speaker's condition, where the outside rhymes describe his cage of flesh and the internal rhymes describe his frustrated will. The good-intentioned efforts of the speaker's will are captive in the sin of his flesh, rendering him incapable of following a righteous path, even though he wants to.

It is for this reason that the speaker desires God's violence. In the third quatrain, he makes his entreaty again in light of the description of his sinful nature. The turn between lines eight and nine gives Donne an opportunity to return the focus to God and the speaker's request after having focused on the speaker's sinful and hopeless condition. With a shift in focus, he can proclaim his love for God, even though he has just admitted that he does not act according to God's will. In spite of hopelessness in quatrain two, the turn provides a fresh start where he can renew his intention to change, or rather, be changed by God.

The third quatrain is written in *cddc* rhyme scheme. The change in scheme from the Petrarchan envelope to the Shakespearean pattern accompanies the speaker's change in tone, from demanding and frustrated to affectionate and subdued, yet hopeful. The speaker is subdued as he concedes his spiritual helplessness, but by loving God he gains hope that God will mercifully intercede. At the beginning of the quatrain the speaker affectionately proclaims "Yet dearely I love you," despite his sinful flesh. Love for God allows him to believe that he "would be loved faine" in return, if it weren't for his unbearable attachment to the "enemie." The speaker goes from hoping in God's faine, or glad, rejoiced, and well-pleased, love, to simultaneously admitting his spiritual helplessness.²⁴ He is "betroth'd" to the "enemie," and therefore cannot be loved gladly by God. The word "betrothed" helps the speaker convey his

helplessness, because his hope for having an affectionate relationship with God, as expressed in line nine, is thwarted by his near wedlock to the enemy, just like someone in an unhappy marriage is barred from seeing their true lover. Romantic language helps us understand the speaker's relationship with God, and is even more effective in the sonnet form, because sonnets are traditionally used as romantic poetry, rendering them contextually appropriate for this metaphor.

The speaker's hope returns in line 11 when he considers that God might "divorce" him from sin. Here the image of hope is strengthened by the end rhymes of "againe" and "faine." First "againe" establishes that God has already gotten the speaker out of this helplessness once before, affording the speaker more hope that God will choose to "breake that knot" this time around, as well. The word also implies that the speaker betrayed God at least once after this previous intervention, returning unintentionally to his sinful ways. This reminds us of the speaker's need for God mercy. Second, the word "againe," which is a hopeful image of God's consistent and repeated mercy, rhymes with faine, a description of God's well-pleased love or approval which the speaker hopes for. The two rhymes strengthen each other and raise the speaker's hope that God will indeed show up. The rhymes "enemie" (line 10) and "I" (line 12) help show the speakers admitted state of helplessness, because he ties himself to God's enemy through similarity of sound. Nevertheless, the speaker has hope for his future through his love of God. He hopes that God will "take him to" Himself, in a way that will draw the speaker close and "imprison" him in righteousness, which would make him safe from sin. In short, Donne uses the structure of the third quatrain to express his hope that God will show up to meet his spiritual need. The hope in lines nine and 11, which show love for God and remembrance of God's past goodness, alternates with the speaker's subdued state of helplessness, ultimately leading to the speaker's powerful proclamation of his need for God in the final couplet.

The final couplet serves one of the traditional purposes to offer a strong solution to a formerly developed problem. In this poem, the ending couplet makes a comprehensive statement about the complex nature of the speaker's will and the necessity of his prayer for God's action. He is no longer troubled and wrestling with his problem, but boldly presents his final solution and request: that God violently bring him into righteousness. It is within this couplet that "Donne's contradictory conceits of enthralled freedom and ravished chastity ... famously appear."²⁵ Gerigius identifies the complexity of doctrine that Donne displays through his diction and syntax. I wish to take the discussion one step further to show how the position of the words within the ending couplet binds them together in a neat and unified form, strengthening the speaker's argument and request.

The first line in the couplet says "... I / Except you enthrall me, never shall be free." The word enthrall means "to 'enslave' mentally or morally," or, as used in today's society, to "captivate" someone's attention.²⁶ This captivation being a prerequisite to freedom seems quite counterintuitive, because the speaker is essentially asking to be enslaved by God. However, because the speaker has established his problem that he is already "captiv'd" and "usurped" by another, it makes sense that he needs God to respond by entralling him. In the second line the speaker asserts that he will never be "chaste, except you ravish me." Ravish was a commonly-used word in the 1600s meaning "to drag off or carry away (a woman) by force or with violence" or "to rape, violate (a woman)."²⁷ So the idea of being ravished is an antonym for being chaste, or pure. However, the speaker has already asserted that he is "betroth'd" to God's enemy, and that he needs God to "break that knot." Therefore, the only way for him to gain spiritual chastity is to tear him away from his other 'lover,' sin, through radical means.

While these two lines can be understood individually, the end rhymes bind them together as a unified whole. This strengthens the overall message. Notice that the first line ends in the speaker's desired result, to "be free" and the second ends in the desired action "you ravish me." By situating the words in this manner, Donne rhymes "be free" with "ravish me." This pairing emphasizes the whole idea of the couplet by conveying that the speaker needs God to ravish him in order to be free of sin's grip, giving a third reiteration of the contradictory combinations: enthrall with free, ravish with chaste, and now ravish with free. Three repetitions of the speaker's point are simply more effective than two numerically, and may be more powerful symbolically because three is a holy number, as Christians often refer to God as a trinity. The couplet is a short, unified form in which the speaker can make a powerful statement at the end of a complex poem.

Once again the sonnet divides the content of the poem into organized parts. The first quatrain is a plea from the speaker for God to "batter my heart." The second quatrain explains why the speaker needs God to act forcefully upon him, showing that the speaker is incapable of loving God well and being righteous. This is complex because the speaker wants to be righteous but still needs God to force him into the act, because the will of his sinful flesh and the will of his soul do not agree. The turn introduces the speaker's affection and hope in God despite his estrangement, expounding on his spiritual need. Finally, the couplet solves the problem by holding in a tight and unified form the paradoxes of Christian need for violent mercy in order to get what the soul desires.

6. Conclusion

The Holy Sonnets “Oh, to vex me” and “Batter my heart” strongly exemplify how Donne’s choice of form successfully handles paradox in Christian doctrine. Other Holy Sonnets show doctrinal paradoxes as well, such as “Death be not proud,” which explores the Christian view of death in light of post mortem eternal life, and “As due by many titles,” which attempts to define the speaker’s identity both as a holy creation of God and as a decaying piece of the earth. These Holy Sonnets and others could be read closely to examine the effectiveness of the form in conveying doctrinal principles. However, such a grand project is far beyond the scope of this undertaking. One with such a task would also undoubtedly come upon a problem. The sonnets that this essay examines are, naturally, particularly good at demonstrating paradoxes through their form. Other sonnets may not have such an explicit connection between form and function, or may not use their form to meet the same function regarding Christianity. However, this would not negate the original claim that the sonnet structure is useful to contemplate paradoxes in Christian doctrine, because the explorations that have been conducted prove the sonnet’s value.

The tight and rigid form that Donne uses to write his Holy Sonnets opens up wide opportunities for meaning. If he had written in prose, or used a less traditional form of poetry, much of the profundity of the Divine Meditations would have been lost. In our current literary climate, it is important to recognize and appreciate the profundity that traditional forms, such as sonnets, can express, because, as contemporary poet Christian Wiman claims, current poets have “a widespread tendency to distrust any form that seems too intact, to assume that it distorts...” our mental climate of uncertainty.²⁸ However, the Holy Sonnets are far from a rote verbalization of dead dogma. They wrestle with complexities and encourage religious contemplation, proving “that it’s sometimes precisely in those works that exhibit the greatest degree of formal coherence, ... that a reader may experience ... the most intense anxiety and uncertainty.”²⁹ This is all to say that, in a time where free verse is an incredibly popular form of religious poetry, it would be worthwhile to consider using traditional forms once again.

7. References

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