



John Donne's and George Herbert's Employment of Secular Language and Images in Their Religious Poetry

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Abstract

Recent studies in Herbert and Donne show that most critics focus on the study of theological or biblical aspects of Herbert's and Donne's poetry. This argument is more accurate as far as Herbert is concerned because he inspires the reader's mind as he approaches spiritual life by means of pure simplicity of language and thought. But when it comes to Donne, this argument becomes less accurate, or needs a bit more investigation. Before he decides to write religious poetry, Donne wrote many secular poems mainly about love, yet secular images do not disappear completely in his religious poetry, but rather create a very controversial poet who struggles between his secular and religious character. However, Herbert uses many images, devices, and metaphors of popular love poetry. Herbert's intermingling of secular love images with his serious divine theme does not affect his religious voice in his religious poetry. Rather, this excellent technique of intermingling helps express Herbert's divine themes very effectively. The purpose of this paper is to examine the use of secular love images and devices in the religious poetry of Herbert and Donne. This should help us to decide whose poetry reveals a more religious view of life and more faith than the other.

Key words: Secular Language; Images; Religious poetry

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To begin with Donne, the argument may be completely different. Sometimes it is so difficult to draw a line between his secular love poetry and his religious one. This is because Donne was struggling between two kinds of life: "Jack Donne, young-man-about-town, and Dr. John Donne, the sober Dean of St Paul's" (Guibbory, 1993, p.126). Many critics think that Donne was writing religious poetry even before he took his religious positions and during the same period he was writing secular poetry. If this argument is accurate, then we have to say that Donne is a poet who is struggling between the sacred and the secular. Guibbory contends that "Izaak Walton assigned the secular love poetry to the youthful Donne and the religious poetry to the mature priest" (Ibid.).

It seems that unlike Herbert, the secular images in Donne's poetry are not used to enhance and support the religious attitude of the poem. In the "holy sonnet 13," Herbert begins with a question: "that if this present were the world's last night?" Donne begins investigating his faith by questioning the image of Christ in his heart without getting a clear answer at the end. The reader would not be answered whether Donne is assured about Christ presence in his heart, or that he is desperate:

No, no; but as in my idolatry
 I said to all my profane mistresses,
 Beauty of pity, foulness only is
 A sign of rigour; so I say to thee,
 To wicked spirits are horrid shapes assign'd;
 This beauteous form assures a piteous mind. (9-14).

As if Donne is questioning whether God "might appreciate his wit much as his 'prophane' mistress did?" (Ibid., p.127).

The relationship between Donne and his biography is also widely discussed. Donne lived in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, a time, according to Guibbory:

of exploration, both scientifically and geographically. The New World was being explored and astronomical observations by Copernicus, Kepler, and Galileo led to a discovery to a new order of the heavens. England also saw the emergence of

modern, experimental science, which proposed to discover the true order of the physical world (Ibid., p.129).

It is also a time that saw great divisions in the Church. This might be the reason behind Donne's doubts almost about everything in his poetry. Guibbory argues that Donne's poems "reveal a skepticism about social conventions and institutions" and an "emphasis on the process of active discovery, its sceptical stance towards received ideas and poetic conventions, and...[a] sense of excitement at making fresh discoveries about human experience"(Ibid.). These characteristics of Donne's poetry make it a "poetic counterpart of the enquiry taking place in many fields in the seventeenth century" (Ibid.). In fact, any critical reading of John Donne's poetry will probably affirm this argument; his poetry reveals an attitude of a person who doubts faith in almost everything: women, the church, God. Carole Somerville argues that there is a mutual relationship between the religious and the secular love poetry of Donne and that "there are occasions when barriers between the secular and religious poetry erode, when religious language breaks through into the love poems and vice versa"(NP).

In fact, the main difference between Herbert and Donne when it comes to the secular aspect of their poetry is that Donne does not use the secular devices and images in his religious poetry to enhance the religious picture and his religious attitude in the readers' mind, but on the contrary, these secular devices enhance and increase his doubts and inquiry about the real faith. Another difference that distinguishes him from Herbert is that his religious language and his attitude break through his secular love poetry and vice versa. The word 'apostasy' from the following example from "Elegy III" may clarify the two differences mentioned above:

Although thy hand and faith, and good works too,
Have sealed thy love which nothing should undo,
Yea though thou fall back, that apostasy
Confirm thy love; yet much, much I fear thee (1-4).

Here, we may quote Somerville's argument that Donne's "distrust and suspicion about female fidelity could be said, in psychoanalytical terms, to be a displacement of his own anxiety about his personal betrayal of the church" (20). In fact the word 'apostasy' could be interpreted in two ways: To give up a religious faith, or to give up a previous loyalty. If we adopt the first meaning of the word, then Somerville's previous argument would be more accurate. However, this technique of using pun words is so clear in Donne's poetry. The use of pun is an indication of Donne's personal and intellectual struggle and an indication of the intermingling of the secular and the religious in his poetry.

In "Sonnet 14," Donne uses sexual language of secular love in his religious poetry:

Batter my heart, three-person'd God, for you
As yet but knock, breathe, shine, and seek to mend;

That I may rise and stand, o'erthrow me, and bend
Your force to break, blow, burn, and make me new.
I, like an usurp'd town to'another due,
Labor to'admit you, but oh, to no end;
Reason, your viceroy in me, me should defend,
But is captiv'd, and proves weak or untrue.
Yet dearly'I love you, and would be lov'd fain,
But am betroth'd unto your enemy;
Divorce me, 'untie or break that knot again,
Take me to you, imprison me, for I,
Except you'enthrall me, never shall be free,
Nor ever chaste, except you ravish me.

Like Herbert's "love 3," Donne's "Sonnet 14" takes the form of secular love poetry. It reveals the complete weakness and submissiveness of a secular lover in front of his lover; verbs like "burn" "enthrall", and "ravish" could be read in sexual terms. Ribes argues that a verb like "to burn would refer to the resulting image of passion of the persons, of the heart, etc. to be on fire (with desire, lust, passion, wrath); to glow...to desire ardently" (p.167). He also argues that a verb like "o'erthrow" "can allude...to a woman (...to throw a person or think over upon its side or upper surface)" (p.167).

These secular images and language employed by Donne in this religious poem put the reader in great bewilderment. It seems that Donne does this on purpose to show his skeptical philosophy where even religion is included. It may be also read as a lament of the secular life he leads without the limitations of religion. Donne ends the sonnet with a decision that "except" God "enthrall" him he "will never be free" of his sins and his angst about the seduction of the secular life, and nor he will be "ever chaste" except God "ravish" him. The word 'ravish', which could mean 'rape', indicates that Donne needs to have faith in God by force. Unlike Herbert, the use of those secular love images and language enhance the idea that Donne is struggling to find faith, and that he does not secure pure faith. The effect on the reader will also be the opposite of Herbert's; instead of inspiring the readers, Donne leaves them bewildered and, like Donne himself, questions his own faith.

To move to Herbert, we may refer to what Robert Whalen observes that secular love imagery in Herbert's poems is a kind of "the figurative description of what in fact is not an essentially physical process" (p.8). While Herbert employs secular love images in his religious poems, he "does object, however, to an emphasis on external trappings as alone constitutive of Real Presence" (Whalen, 2000, p.6). Whalen asserts that, for Herbert, numerous secular love images that repeatedly appear in his poems are merely "external trappings" to convey his religious messages (Ibid.).

In fact, Herbert talks about his theory of what makes a good poetry in his own poems. As a young man, Herbert has shown his dislike of secular love poetry as well as his special appreciation for religious poetry. In a letter to his mother, Herbert remarks:

But I fear the heat of my late *Auge* hath dried up those springs, by which scholars say, the Muses use to take up their habitations. However, I need not their help, to reprove the vanity of those many Love-poems, that are daily writ and consecrated to *Venus*; nor to bewail that so few are writ, that looks towards *God* and *Heaven*. For my own part, my meaning (*dear Mother*) is in these Sonnets, to declare my resolution to be, that my poor Abilities in Poetry, shall be all, and ever consecrated to Gods glory. (Hutchinson, 1941, p.363)

Here, Herbert foreshadows what kind of poetry he is going to write in the future: he does not need the help of the Muses who inspire secular love poetry, and his "poor Abilities in poetry" will be fully devoted to God. Such a firm resolution of Herbert is well demonstrated in the accompanying sonnets sent to his mother together with the letter.

In the first sonnet, Herbert asks several questions: "Doth Poetry wear Venus Livery" and "Why are not Sonnets made of thee [God]?" (3-5). He even compares God's ability to venous in inspiring poets:

Cannot thy love
Heighten a spirit to sound out thy praise
As well as any she? Cannot thy *Dove*
Out-strip their *Cupid* easily in flight? (6-9)

Then he wonders if one can produce songs to braise God's Beauty or not: "Or, since thy ways are deep, and still the same, / Will not a verse run smooth that bears thy name?" (10-11). Herbert thinks that "perhaps the love poets do not consecrate their work to God because religious poetry might be technically less successful" (Daalder, 1986, p.22).

Herbert repeats his opinion that divine love and secular love do not meet; rather they exclude each other:

Sure, Lord, there is enough in thee to dry
Oceans of *Ink*; for, as the Deluge did
Cover the Earth, so doth thy Majesty:
Each Cloud distills thy praise, and doth forbid
Poets to turn it to another use.
Roses and *Lilies* speak thee; and to make
A pair of Cheeks of them, is thy abuse.
Why should I *womens eyes* for Crystal take?
Such poor invention burns in their low mind
Whose fire is wild, and doth not upward go
To praise, and on thee, Lord, some Ink bestow.
Open the bones, and you shall nothing find
In the best *face* but *filth*, when, Lord, in thee
The *beauty* lies in the *discovery*.

Herbert is again convinced that praising God is enough as a subject of poetry "to dry Oceans of Ink". He wishes to "forbid Poets to turn [poetry] to another use" because "Each Cloud distills thy praise". When Herbert makes a contrast between the apparent beauty of secular women and the eternal and genuine Beauty of God, he "concludes that ink should more properly be used to extol God's genuine beauty rather than the ephemeral loveliness of secular mistresses" (Mollenkott, 1972, p.133). Eventually, the young Herbert decides that his poetry will be completely about God and nothing else.

In his other poems, Herbert repeats his attitude of poetry and its subject again and again. In "Jordan I", he criticizes secular poets and poetry and suggests his own way of writing poetry:

Shepherds are honest people; let them sing:
Riddle who list, for me, and pull for Prime:
I envy no mans nightingale or spring;
Nor let them punish me with loss of rime,
Who plainly say, *My God, My King*. (11-15)

In "Jordan (II)" Herbert reflects on poetic language and images. Already in "Jordan (I)." Herbert has shown his distaste for the attractive appearance and complexity of secular love poetry. In this poem, Herbert rejects "quaint words, and trim invention.":

My thoughts began to burnish, sprout, and swell,
Curling with metaphors a plain intention,
Decking the sense, as if it were to sell. (4-6)

Ultimately, he hears an answer from someone, probably "Christ who was for him the Muse of his verse" (Freeman 312).

How wide is all this long pretence!
There is in love a sweetness ready penned:
Copy out only that, and save expense. (16-18)

The true beauty and love of God are perfect and ready to be copied out; it does not need to "quaint words and trim invention". But we may think that Herbert is contradicting himself here. If what he says is true about the beauty of God, then we do not need to read his poems anymore. Barbara Harman thinks that what Herbert says in these poems is to write "poems about not writing poetry" which is like "speeches about not speaking anymore", and that "it seems we need to read them ["Jordan I" and "Jordan II"] in order to know that we need not read them" (p.865). However, we can argue that what Herbert means here is that we do not need the complicated linguistic devices that secular poet use in their poetry. Instead, we can praise God by writing a direct simple poetry that resembles the clarity and the beauty of God's creations.

Thus, we can say that Herbert rejects the idea of using secular love poetry, and decided to make his poetry wholly directed to the Praising and Love of God the Almighty. He even refuses the help of the Muses and the secular linguistic devices and images in his religious poetry. Herbert seems to contradict himself when we find that he uses many secular images and devices in his poetry.

In "Vanity," Herbert so creatively describes how powerful is chemistry in changing things and makes them appear differently:

The subtle Chymic can devest
And strip the creature naked, till he find
The callow principles within their nest:
There he imparts to them his mind,
Admitted to their bed-chamber, before
They appear trim and dressed
To ordinary suitors at the door. (15-21)

Herbert uses this secular image to enhance his religious argument. In other words, Herbert wants to say that only the real religious people can see the reality of this material and worldly life which is disguised by beautiful appearances, while in fact it is ugly and attracts only the secular lovers. Here, we have the secular image of a lady's dressing-room and of chemistry, a favorite Renaissance subject. Herbert talks about the chemist, a spiritual figure, who is invited to the most private place of ladies, while secular male lovers are not permitted to enter into it. The male "suitors" never see the true selves of ladies without any disguise. They blindly see only the artificial beauty.

In "Christmas," Herbert depicts many secular images with the Biblical ones. In this poem Herbert joins and listens to the singing shepherds. However, this image, which is reminiscent of Wordsworth's romantic poetry, is not the main theme of the poem; Herbert cleverly makes a transition and connects this beautiful image to his religious purpose when he says:

My soul's a shepherd too; a flock it feeds
Of thoughts, and words, and deeds.
The pasture is thy word: the streams, thy grace
Enriching all the place.
Shepherd and flock shall sing, and all my powers
Out-sing the day-light hours. (17-22)

Herbert introduces this secular image of simple and merry life just to tell us that he wants to enjoy what those shepherds enjoy only through praising God. He wants to imitate the shepherds' songs by producing simple and cheerful songs in praising God. This simple image of the shepherd helped Herbert convey his religious message that we need to imitate the simplicity of nature in praising the glorious beauty of God.

In "love3," Herbert shows his clear use of secular love poetry to support his religious theme. In this poem, Herbert creates a skillful mixture of secular and religious images. Jasper argues that, in this poem, "Theology is not overt, but grows within the context of English village life with its provision of a welcome inn, and within the universal act of human love making, expressed tenderly yet without a hint of prudishness" (21). The image of a tired traveler and a generous or hospitable innkeeper could be interpreted either religiously or secularly: it is the relationship between God and a sinner or between a woman and her seduced lover. The dialogue between the two goes like this:

Love bade me welcome: yet my soul drew back,
Guilty of dust and sin.
But quick-eyed Love, observing me grow slack
From my first entrance in,
The Secular in George Herbert's Religious Poetry
Drew nearer to me, sweetly questioning,
If I lacked any thing.
A guest, I answered, worthy to be here:
Love said, You shall be he.
I the unkind, ungrateful? Ah my dear,
I cannot look on thee.

Love took my hand, and smiling did reply,
Who made the eyes but I?
Truth Lord, but I have marred them: let my shame
Go where it doth deserve.
And know you not, says Love, who bore the blame?
My dear, then I will serve.
You must sit down, says Love, and taste my meat:
So I did sit and eat.

The poem deals with one of the most important theological principle of Christianity: The Holy Communion. Through this Holy Communion, the poem assures God's great love towards man who is unworthy and "Guilty of dust and sin." Although the subject of the poem apparently deals with the theological concept of The Holy Communion, it takes the form of secular love poetry. The poem does not only use the dialogue technique found in secular love poetry, but also it employs secular images of seduction: "quick-eyed Love... drew nearer to me, sweetly questioning, / If I lacked anything"; "Love took my hand, and smiling did reply, / Who made the eyes but I?" Love continues to seduce the hesitant lover with sexual language until the end of the poem. At the end, the hesitant lover yields to seduction and decides to taste her "meat". Herbert skillfully mingles the two concepts of love— secular and sacred— to convey the meaning of the Eucharistic feast or the Holy Communion.

Psychologically speaking, some might argue that Herbert's use of secular images refer to the unconscious mind of Freud. While the conscious mind includes everything that we are aware of and the aspect of our mental processing where we think rationally, the unconscious mind is the reservoir of feelings, thoughts, urges, and memories which is outside of our conscious awareness. Usually, the contents of the unconscious mind are unpleasant, and if they are pleasant, then they are suppressed because they are prohibited by society, religion or any other external force. Freud realized that "the unconscious often expresses itself in the form of dreams, since at night during sleep, the vigilance of the repressive ego in regard to the unconscious desire is distilled. Dreams express wishes or desires that are that cannot find expression in waking life precisely because they are at odds with the requirements of the ego, which itself registers the requirements of the society" (Rivkin & Ryan, 2004, p.390). A good example of this argument is that if "someone who is raised in a strongly religious way that proscribe sexual activity, [he] may perform forbidden sexual acts ritualistically so as to seem to be respecting the norm while nonetheless attaining satisfaction" (ibid 390). It may happen to some people to apply this to Herbert's "love 3" and say that the sexuality revealed in this poem corresponds to Herbert's unconsciousness. In this case, we may consider that the good kind of poetry, as Wordsworth and Coleridge think, is the poetry that flows smoothly from our unconsciousness and breaks away from the "artificiality" and "triviality" or over-elaborate

and contrived poetry (Preface to Lyrical Ballads). In the same way, one might say that Herbert is a creative poet whose poetry runs out of his mind so smoothly and unconsciously that poetry means to him what dreams mean to Freud. However, the clear reference to religion in a simple language, and the simplicity of thought contradict this argument.

To conclude, both Donne and Herbert intermingle and employ secular images in their religious poetry. While Herbert wrote only religious poetry in which he employs some secular devices and images, Donne wrote religious and secular love poetry that overlaps. Also, while Herbert uses these images to enhance and inspire innocent life of spirituality, Donne's employment of images enhances and increases his doubts about easy, simple, and direct faith in God.

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