

Signature of a Servant



By Elizabeth H.

The American Heritage Dictionary describes a servant as “one who expresses submission, recognizance, or debt to another.” One of the ways people serve is through writing, and many authors have used this ability in their service to God. John Donne, an English poet and clergyman during the Renaissance, was one such author. *Holy Sonnet XIV* in particular shows the depth of both emotion and technical planning in Donne’s writing.

Holy Sonnet XIV is alive with passion. As a sonnet, the poem has only fourteen lines, but it is bursting at the seams with powerful and often violent verbs. Donne opens with the phrase “Batter my heart” (Donne), which completely contradicts the normal request of love. It jolts the reader because most people are longing for their hearts to be secure--not damaged. Donne continues by asking God to “bend [His] force, to breake, blowe, burn and make me new” (Donne). The work of a blacksmith comes to mind (Payne) and the words parallel an Old Testament passage: “[God will] take his place as a refiner of silver, as a cleanser of dirty clothes. He'll scrub the Levite priests clean, refine them like gold and silver, until they're fit for God, [written at eastern alamance hs in 05] fit to present offerings of righteousness” (Malachi). *Sonnet XIV* gives readers an intimate picture of the vulnerability in adoration. “The rape preserves, rather than destroys, chastity. God builds up as he tears down, possesses as he frees, is as honorable as passionate--that is, in him all paradoxes find their supra-rational resolution...” (Payne). John Donne is not afraid of the

God he serves; rather, he is moved to a profound humility through the recognition of his God's ability to create change. "By the poem's conclusion, the conceit of the rape which ensures chastity no longer skirts blasphemy. In fact, in Donne's hands, it even becomes orthodox, an ideal of devotion worthy of emulation" (Payne). The paradoxes at the end of the poem leave people both convicted in heart and puzzled in mind. Asking God to imprison one's soul is a staggering thought, but "through every subtlety and bizarre interpretation, the hearer was (and, even to-day, the reader is) carried forward by the weight and force of the preacher's fervid reasoning" (North).

That fervid reasoning can also be seen in the meter of *Sonnet XIV* if it is examined closely. "For instance, the first line opens with a trochee on the violent 'Batter my heart,' the trochee reinforcing the idea [written at eastern alamance hs in 05] of the crashing blow and response for which the poet prays" (Payne). The next few lines are filled with single syllable words that force the reading of the poem to sound similar to the pounding of a fist on a table, or in this case, the poet's heart (Gardner). Other writers of the day were using strict iambic pentameter, and it would be centuries before writers like e. e. cummings would receive approval. "The sinewy elasticity of meter and the intellectual contortion of metaphorical conceit...are attributes of the 'metaphysical' style of poetry of which Donne is the preeminent representative.... [Though criticized, it is] difficult to imagine Donne's passionate outpouring being expressed in any other way" (Payne). Donne is wrestling within the confines of the sonnet's form and mirroring the subject's struggle inside himself. The harsh images and pace of Holy Sonnet XIV escalate and then everything changes: "The jarring metrical irregularity of the previous quatrains is suddenly transformed into pure iambic pentameter for the final couplet.... The iambic meter here reflects the peace found

as the poem finds its spiritual resolution, not necessarily its intellectual solution. The tension still exists, but in a poised state of equilibrium" (Payne). In this ending couplet Donne also solves a major problem with sonnets--the couplet does not seem to be a last minute addition or flippant reflection to fill up the rest of the space.

Except for [Gerard Manley] Hopkins, no poet has crammed more into the sonnet than Donne. In spite of all the liberties he takes with his line, he succeeds in the one essential of the sonnet: he appears to need exactly fourteen lines to say exactly what he has to say.... He was not, I believe, aiming at originality, and therefore the originality of the *Holy Sonnets* is the more profound (Gardner).

John Donne was an exceptional writer. He was willing to be broken and honest in the face of an audience, but his intelligence and forethought shine through his work as well. It is not often that a writer--or any other type of artist--is able to capture all of these qualities in one work. *Holy Sonnet XIV* is a great representative of Donne's writing and service to God. While other poets of the time [written at eastern alamanca hs in 05] used the sonnet as a template for writing, the color and value in Donne's writing makes the reader forget that he is reading a sometimes stilted literary form. "A reader may care little for the details of seventeenth century theology and yet enjoy without qualification Donne's fervid and original thinking...the figurative richness and splendid harmonies...of argument, of exhortation and of exalted meditation" (North).

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