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Résumé de l'article

Cet article examine l'intense préoccupation pour la mort et la nécessité de se souvenir des morts dans les *Songs and Sonets* de John Donne. L'auteur étudie ce phénomène en rapport avec l'interdiction protestante des rituels d'intercession. L'auteur montre que ces poèmes contenus dans des manuscrits privés contestent l'imposition par la doctrine de la séparation des vivants et des morts et expriment un désir déplacé pour une communion avec les morts qui a été détruit par les réformes religieuses. Stephen Greenblatt et d'autres chercheurs ont écrit au sujet de l'élimination du purgatoire et l'anxiété culturelle que cela a entraînée et qui se manifeste dans Hamlet et d'autres textes littéraires. Toutefois, la poésie de Donne approfondit ces analyses en raison de son engagement plus direct avec les débats protestants contemporains au sujet du statut des morts, et de sa volonté de renouveler d'anciennes formes de relation avec les morts. Les amoureux obsédés par la mort dans les *Songs and Sonets* négligent souvent les enseignements protestants au sujet de la mort, et empruntent au pouvoir des saints, des reliques, des inscriptions d'intercession, et aux pratiques traditionnelles d'inhumation, dans le but de réduire cette séparation.

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The task of properly remembering the dead was both a spiritual and literary challenge in post-Reformation England, and no writer wrestles with this problem as persistently and inventively as John Donne. In eliminating Purgatory, Protestant reformers believed, of course, that they were not only correcting a false doctrine but freeing the laity from the onerous spiritual and financial duty of supplying prayers for the dead. Recent studies of death in early modern England, however, have questioned the triumphal rhetoric that accompanied reform and focused instead on the way in which the ban on intercessory prayer fractured the deep sense of community between the living and the dead cultivated by late medieval Catholicism. Historian Eamon Duffy comments, for

instance, on the magnitude of the loss of Purgatory for early English Protestants as he notes the sudden absence of prayers for the deceased in the 1552 Prayer Book's liturgy for burial: "In the world of the 1552 book the dead were no longer with us. They could neither be spoken to nor even about, in any way that affected their well-being. The dead had gone beyond the reach of human contact, even of human prayer."¹ The closing down of these liturgical links with the dead has also been traced by literary critics interested in the extent to which the theological ban on intercession altered representations of the dead in this period. The issue has been pursued most vigorously in Stephen Greenblatt's book on *Hamlet*. The ghost in that play is read as a haunting reminder for Protestant audiences of England's Catholic past, and the visitation is specifically provoked by a son's failure to pray for his dead father's soul. Greenblatt's work powerfully demonstrates how the reform of death registers in one of Shakespeare's most enduring plays, and at more than one point in the book Donne's writing is connected to the same Catholic cult of the dead that Shakespeare engages.²

Greenblatt presents the shift from Catholic ritual to Protestant literature as a process of disenchantment that quickly succeeds in obscuring all spiritual traces or reminders of the dead.³ He makes a compelling argument that *Hamlet's* power derives from its engagement with late medieval Catholicism and "appropriation of [its] weakened and damaged structures" (254–54). But Greenblatt's book is problematic in its characterization of post-Reformation religious culture, and its suggestion that the new literary forms available to Protestants provided a diminished and fundamentally altered way of remembering the dead. The elimination of Purgatory, he argues, "turned negotiations with the dead from an institutional process governed by the church to a poetic process governed by guilt, projection, and imagination" (252). Greenblatt asserts that the presence of the dead has been diluted into a "theatrical rather than theological" reality (253), and while he is uncomfortable with the term, he ultimately joins the chorus of scholars arguing that Protestant literature helped to "secularize" the experience and meaning of death.⁴

The limitations of this rigid demarcation between the older communal Catholic culture of ritual and an emerging faith characterized by its commitment to the word become obvious when one tries to fit Donne's writings on death into this framework. Donne's imaginative response to death was rich and varied and has been studied extensively, but critics have largely followed the pattern just outlined of viewing his textual engagements with death as desper-

ate, private, sometimes ironic efforts to make writing perform the sacred task previously performed by Catholic ritual. Matthew Greenfield is representative in arguing, for instance, that the collection of “Anniversarie” poems that Donne wrote on the death of Elizabeth Drury displays an awareness of ceremonial conventions but quickly deviates and “pulls hard against its connection to funeral ritual and to the consolation of a group of mourners.” The speaker’s private anxieties eventually assume control, and the result is that the “ceremonies represented in the poems are ... truncated or deformed.”⁵ Greenfield’s conclusion is that Donne contributes along with Spenser, Jonson, and other mainstream Renaissance writers to the development of a new form of grieving that anticipates modern poetry in its privileging of “interiority and emotional authenticity” (94). In his response to death, then, Donne appears to have largely conformed to the religious and literary orthodoxies of his day and contributed to the gradual secularization they helped to bring about.⁶ What this type of reading neglects, however, is the less conventional instinct that also surfaces in Donne’s handling of death. The purpose of this essay is to demonstrate how an older, pre-Reformation longing to maintain some sense of communion with the dead returns and takes shape specifically in Donne’s *Songs and Sonets*.⁷

The religious and Catholic elements in the *Songs and Sonets* are well known to scholars, but a detailed study has yet to be done of how the representations of the dead in these poems address and wrestle with many of the issues still being debated as Protestants struggled to find consensus about the proper way to view the dead. Other religious concerns have been addressed in studies of the *Songs and Sonets*; scholars have been especially interested, for instance, in the way in which Donne’s “residual Catholicism” emerges in the highly sacramental depiction of love developed in these poems.⁸ But critics interested in death and the religious questions surrounding it have gravitated instead to Donne’s *Holy Sonnets*, the *Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions*, the *Death’s Duell* sermon, and other devotional works. It is usually assumed that genuine religious concerns about death are obscured in the *Songs and Sonets* by the humorous and erotic tone of these love lyrics. In a recent essay on Donne and death, Ramie Targoff acknowledges the many “playful conceits about the consequences of death” in the *Songs and Sonets* but states that Donne’s exploration of the issue is “more seriously considered — and more anxiously expressed — in his devotional writings.”⁹ A careful reading of these poems, however, in relation to the continuing debate about the status of the dead in post-Refor-

mation England demonstrates that Donne's repeated attempts to resist death's separating force are shaped by an anxiety about the widening spiritual gap distancing Protestants from the dead. Moreover, while the Catholic references in the *Songs and Sonets* are often whimsical and do not officially prove that Donne embraced the faith in which he was raised, it is important to note that his poems draw on the power of saints, relics, and older burial practices during a period in which these traditional forms of remembrance were being forgotten and completely eliminated from the English church.

I. Separation from the dead and "Since she whome I lovd"

Before considering the *Songs and Sonets*, I want to look more closely at how the status of the dead was articulated in the broader religious discourse of the period and is taken up by Donne in "Since she whome I lovd" as a deep and irresolvable problem. The first point to make is that the issue of how to remember and honour the dead properly had not been quickly resolved at the outset of the Reformation with the elimination of Purgatory. Historian Peter Marshall has shown that "the campaign to suppress 'superstition' in practices and attitudes relating to the dead was not fought and won in the middle of the sixteenth century, but continued into the reign of James I and beyond."¹⁰ At the heart of almost all Protestant reform in this area was the oft-quoted principle from Augustine that words and rituals used to observe death "are rather comforts to the living than helps to the dead."¹¹ While the Church of England officially adopted this belief, Puritans worried that older rituals that were retained in the liturgy, or simply allowed to continue, kept alive the belief in the dead's need for intercession. On the other side of this debate was a more amorphous group of conformists and Prayer-book Protestants who accepted reformed teaching about the dead but were more sensitive to disruptions of the ritual pattern. A late sixteenth-century sermon by Bishop Pilkington indicates some of the tensions surrounding the handling of the dead; it provides a guide for evaluating funerals in order to be certain "that no superstition should be committed in them, wherein the papists infinitely offend." The list of existing practices that still needed to be suppressed included "masses, dirges, trentals, singing, ringing, holy water, hallowed places, year's minds and month-minds, crosses, pardon letters to be buried with them, mourners, de profundis by every lad that

could say it, dealing of money solemnly for the dead, watching of the corpse, bell and banner, with many more that I could reckon.”¹² The list suggests that while Protestants had officially stopped believing in Purgatory, many still felt an instinctive sense of obligation to the dead that needed to be expressed.

Protestants attending church during the reigns of Elizabeth and James I would have encountered a fuller rationale for the restriction on prayers for the dead in the *Book of Homilies*’ “Homilie or Sermon concerning Prayer.” Early in the sermon, prayer is commended to the audience as a principal expression of charity, and the sermon insists that “Whomsoever we are bound by expresse commandment to love, for those also are wee bound in conscience to pray.”¹³ But this generous invitation to prayer does not extend to the dead, even if they are still loved, because there is no scriptural precedent to justify prayers for them:

Let us not therefore dreame either of Purgatory, or of prayer for the soules of them that are dead: but let us earnestly and diligently pray for them which are expressly commanded in holy Scripture, namely for Kings and Rulers, for Ministers of Gods holy word and Sacraments, for the Saints of this world. (123)

In an interesting reversal, the institutions of church and state become the new beneficiaries of the charity previously extended to the dead.

The sudden disregard for the dead and exclusive focus on the “Saints of this world” evoked an angry, impassioned response from exiled English Catholic William Allen. He accuses the reformers of seeking “to breake the band of peace betwixt theyme [the dead] and us” by denying the power of intercessory prayers and rituals.¹⁴ As he says, their “forgetfullnesse coommethe by the wicked suggestion of these late develishe opinions, which maynteyne that the prayers of the lyving, or their workes, doo not extende to the deade in Christe” (1371). Followers of Protestant teaching “hathe no compassion of [the dead], nor feele not howe they are knitt unto us” (1361). The words of a Catholic polemicist like Allen give us some sense of how the English recusant community that Donne belonged to early in his life might have felt as it experienced the full effect of religious reforms.¹⁵

“Since she whome I lovd,” one of Donne’s most personal death poems, shows how this theological and ecclesiastical controversy complicated the event

of death. This holy sonnet is generally assumed to have been written in response to the passing of Donne's wife in 1617 and after he had been ordained in the Church of England.¹⁶

Since she whome I lovd, hath payd her last debt
 To Nature, and to hers, and my good is dead
 And her Soule early into heaven ravished,
 Wholy on heavenly things my mind is sett.
 Here the admyring her my mind did whett
 To seeke thee God; so streames do shew the head,
 But though I have found thee, and thou my thirst hast fed,
 A holy thirsty dropsy melts mee yett.
 But why should I begg more Love, when as thou
 Dost woe my soul, for hers offering all thine:
 And dost not only feare least I allow
 My love to Saints and Angels, things divine,
 But in thy tender jealousy dost doubt
 Least the World, fleshe, yea Devill putt thee out.¹⁷

What the poem describes is a largely unsuccessful process of mourning in which God presents himself as a substitute for the deceased lover, but this new relationship fails fully to console the speaker. The speaker has followed the Protestant custom of avoiding an elaborate mourning process; he has quickly relinquished his sense of attachment to the dead and is trying, in neo-platonic fashion, to transfer his affections for his beloved to God and "holy things." The sense of loss and disruption, however, is quietly registered early in the poem. The speaker refers to his wife, for instance, in the past tense as someone he "lovd." R. Clifton Spargo also observes that the idea of her presence with God is problematic as the word "ravished" implies an act of "abduction" by God.¹⁸

The inadequacy of this curtailed mourning process becomes more obvious in the second half of the poem, which begins with an admission from the speaker that he continues to experience a sense of both spiritual and physical loss: a "holy thirsty dropsy melts mee yet." He has expressed confidence that his beloved has gone to heaven, but only her "Soule" has been saved, and critics have drawn a connection between the woman's absent body and the painful desire that the speaker still feels.¹⁹ The speaker's grief suggests the need for a

more formal process of mourning and remembrance that Donne was later to defend in a sermon on mourning. Donne's text in the sermon is John 11: 35, "Jesus wept," and he uses this passage to justify mourning as a "naturall" and charitable gesture. An "outward" or formal act of grief is necessary, according to Donne, for "without outward declarations, who can conclude an inward love?"²⁰ To illustrate this type of mourning, Donne makes a provocative reference to two pre-Reformation figures, Augustine and Ambrose, whose feelings of Christian love lead them not only to mourn but also to pray for those they had lost. As a preacher in the Church of England, Donne does not, of course, defend this practice and condemns it quite explicitly in another sermon,²¹ but he is rather charitable in his response and explains that prayers for the dead are motivated in this case by the same pious instinct that leads Christians to mourn for the dead. According to Donne, both men believed that the dead were in heaven and did not need their help, "but because they saw not in what state they were, they thought that something might be asked at Gods hand in their behalf; and so out of a humane and pious officiousnesse, in a devotion perchance indigested, uncocted, and retaining yet some crudities, some irresolutions, they strayed into prayers for them after they were dead" (4:332). Donne's point is that survivors require an outlet for their grief, and he seems willing to forgive and even overlook the violation of a central Protestant teaching because he regards the sense of attachment that inspired prayers for the dead as rooted not in superstition but in a "humane and pious" feeling of love.

Donne's generous attitude toward mourning and prayers for the dead helps to clarify the strains in the speaker's relationship with God late in "Since she whome I lov'd." The speaker's deep but unexpressed attachment to his dead beloved creates a conflict with God, who is presented as jealously "wooing" the speaker and competing with other human and spiritual rivals to win the speaker's full affection. The poem's retrospective account interprets death as an occasion for spiritual growth that will "whett" the speaker's desire for God, but the speaker is unable to find complete consolation in his now exclusive relationship with God. He must wonder why his desires are not satisfied: "But why should I begg more Love, when as thou / Dost woe my soul, for hers offering all thine . . ." (9–10). As Spargo notes, these lines suggest an exchange in which God presents himself as compensation for the wife that he has taken from the speaker (98–99).²² The speaker faces the dilemma of having to sublimate all of his human affections for the dead onto a rather distant God. The excess of love

and sorrow that death produces cannot be expressed in prayers for the dead or ritual expressions of mourning, and the speaker's only option is to forget.

The possibility of spiritual connection with the dead appears in a very different form a few lines later when "Saints and Angels" (l. 12) are identified as other beings who compete with God for the speaker's affections. Prayers had traditionally been offered by the living to saints and angels rather than on their behalf, but this practice was still restricted by Protestants as part of their more general effort to sever all links between the living and dead. The "Homilie or Sermon concerning Prayer" in the *Book of Homilies* rejects the invocation of the saints along with prayers for the dead; it argues that the saints "knowe no more what wee doe on earth, then wee know what they doe in heaven" and that the Church should not "put any religion in worshipping of them, or praying unto them" (115). The sermon also teaches that an improper attachment to the saints and angels or other departed souls is an offense to both God and those being invoked: "[T]he Saints and Angels in heaven, will not have us to doe any honour unto them, that is due and proper unto God. Hee *onely* is our father, he *onely* is omnipotent, he *onely* knoweth and understandeth all things, he *onely* can help us at all times, and in all places" (117, emphasis added). This divine desire for exclusive relationship is felt in "Since she whome I lov'd" as the speaker senses and voices God's suspicion about the attachments in his life that could "putt [God] out." God's "tender jealousy" is directed toward certain obvious temptations ("World, fleshe, [and] Devill"), but this Protestant God is also more far-reaching in his concerns and fears that the speaker may be improperly drawn to "Saints and Angels," other "things divine" marked by Protestants as rivals to God. The most powerful and potentially threatening claim on the speaker's affection is, of course, his beloved and not the "Saints," but she resembles them in the sense that she is also no longer among the living and no longer able to hear or be helped by prayers and other ritual expressions of love. Deprived of these older practices, Donne's speaker tries to devote himself completely to God and "heavenly things" but appears unsuccessful and unsatisfied in this attempt.²³ A problematic desire for "more love" persists, and the poem presents no indication that it will be relinquished as the speaker struggles unsuccessfully to repress and re-channel his love for the deceased.

II. Remembrance in the *Songs and Sonets*

If “Since she whome I lovd” exposes the general cultural anxiety with sterner elements of reformed teaching on the dead, the *Songs and Sonets* develop a more positive and daring response to these problems. Shifts in Donne’s writing on religious matters are not uncommon and suggest his very restless and evolving relationship with English Protestantism; and the *Songs and Sonets* confront the barriers separating the living and dead but with a greater willingness to question reformed regulations and re-imagine forms of connection with the dead that Protestant reformers were working to eliminate. Written by most accounts in the early 1590s, a period before Donne’s conversion and during which he experienced social exclusion due to suspicions about his Catholicism, the poems feature speakers who often seem marginalized and uneasy with the mainstream Protestant culture of that period.²⁴ The Catholic references that appear in the poems cannot be completely separated from the ironic tone that runs throughout the collection, but the incorporation of a number of pre-Reformation rituals for the dead suggests a genuine fascination with practices that were contested or no longer part of the church’s liturgical structure. Saints, relics, intercession, and other Catholic rituals have a strange, recurring presence in the *Songs and Sonets* and serve an important function by creating points of contact between the living and dead.

Moreover, in the *Songs and Sonets* the figures of death do not point to a theological crisis but appear as obstacles for lovers desperate to extend their relationships. Donne develops one of his most elaborate and reputed revolts against death in “The Canonization,” a poem in which he pictures his lovers as intercessory saints dearly remembered by the living. The threat of death appears in the fourth stanza when the speaker admits that he and his partner “dye by [love]” (28), a phrase that plays on the sexual connotations of the word “dye” and alludes to the popular Renaissance belief that lovemaking shortened life. Even before developing his fantasy about canonization, the speaker displays a critical attitude toward the newer, secular forms of commemoration that he and his lover are prevented from using. As he says,

And if unfit for tombes and hearse
Our legend bee, it will be fit for verse;
And if no peece of Chronicle wee prove,

We'll build in sonnets pretty roomes;
 As a well wrought urn becomes
 The greatest ashes, as halfe-acre tombes. (29–34)

The erotic and private nature of the lovers' relationship makes it unworthy of the kinds of public recognition mentioned here; the speaker accepts this exclusion and cheerfully works around the challenge it presents. The speaker's poetry, referred to in these lines, will serve as a substitute for the more extravagant memorials reserved for public figures. The speaker also offers a critique of the recent custom of seeing tombs as symbols of social status. Vanessa Harding has charted the rise of funerary monuments in London during the later sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, arguing that these physical markers helped to replace intercessory practices. They preserved some memory of the dead by providing Protestants with a permissible way to "connect present and past, to attach the seemingly transient to the permanent."²⁵ Tombs and funerary monuments were expensive, however, and were increasingly used by the nobility during this period to declare the deceased's importance and prestige. John Weever, a contemporary advocate for tombs, argued that size and ornamentation should correspond "to the quality and degree of the person deceased, that by the Tombe every one might be discerned of what ranke he was living."²⁶ Donne's speaker is skeptical, however, about the special benefits associated with tombs and reacts against the hierarchical distinctions that these large and costly structures impose on the dead. He attaches value, instead, to the intimate and "well wrought" quality of "verse" which is a more suitable memorial to his love than the needlessly large "half-acre tombes" that were fashionable. The passage also compares writing to an act of physical construction ("We'll build in sonnets pretty roomes"), suggesting the poem's accessibility for future audiences. The dismissive treatment of tombs challenges a form of commemoration that privileges size and grandeur, and the speaker works towards a less restrictive form.

The critical references to monuments in "The Canonization" anticipate statements that Donne would make later in a 1630 sermon on Matthew 4:18–20.²⁷ Donne spends significant time discussing the sin of pride and argues that conspicuous expenditure on tombs is a prime evidence of this vice: "as our pride begins in our cradle, it continues in our graves and monuments."²⁸ He singles out "separatists" and other parishioners who are rarely in church, while living, yet desire to be buried in the highly visible spaces of the church. "Pride

and vainglory” drive these sinners “to church after their death, in an affectation of high places and sumptuous monuments in church” (2:296). Donne adds a spiritual dimension to the largely aesthetic and economic critique of monuments presented in “The Canonization.” The sermon also considers the impact that tombs and other post-mortem investments can have on the living, and the proud and wealthy are again criticized for the way in which they prepare for death. The money left in their will is spent selfishly and used for “new painting their tombs, and for new flags and scutcheons every certain number of years” (2:296). The rich are guilty of giving no money for the “pious uses,” things like “alms” or “doles” that were still a popular aspect of Protestant funeral rituals. Neglecting this duty means that these individuals have failed to recognize the responsibility that they have to prepare for death in ways that will spread charity to those they leave behind. Donne appeals to his Protestant audience to manage their wills and funerals carefully so that they can take advantage of this opportunity to make a positive contribution even after their death.

“The Canonization” actually pursues this same ideal of reciprocity in a more radical and overtly Catholic fashion. The speaker is not content merely to compete with the monumental forms that he challenges, and devises a spectacular strategy to overcome the neglect and marginalization he and his lover experience while living. The poem’s depiction of love will transform the couple into saints in the eyes of future generations: “by these hymnes, all shall approve / *Us Canoniz’d for Love*” (35–36). This famous and shocking analogy may call the poem’s sincerity into question, but it is a striking example of Donne’s desire to discover points of contact between the living and the dead. The reference to sainthood opens new possibilities for the lovers and introduces a specifically Catholic sounding solution to the problem of mortality. The “tombes” and “Chronicles” rejected by the speaker may only provide the living with powerful reminders of the dead, while the process of canonization, fundamentally different, brings the lovers into a much closer and more dynamic relationship with later generations; future lovers are now able to “invoke” (l. 37) the deceased lovers formally and make a direct request for their help.

Donne’s metaphor of the canonization therefore exploits the special capacity of the Catholic notion of the Communion of Saints to enlist the living and the dead into a single spiritual intercourse. In the 1599 edition of his *Cathechisme*, the English missionary priest Laurence Vaux defines what it traditionally meant to belong to the “communion of the saints”:

We must believe that all good faithful Christian people, whether they be in heaven, earth or purgatory, be members of Christ his mystical body (which is the church) and communicate and participate one with another. The Saints in heaven do pray for us on earth, and we participate of the benefit of their prayers and merits.²⁹

The doctrine clearly encourages an interaction between the saints and those “on earth.”³⁰ The Protestant objection to the cult of the saints was focused primarily on the belief in their power as intercessors, as intermediaries who could provide the living with an additional means by which to earn God’s favour and forgiveness in exchange for prayers and prescribed acts of worship. In order to correct this perception and preserve Christ’s status as sole mediator, the reformers had to do away with the idea that the dead were conscious of the living and responsive to their requests for help.³¹ This idea, however, is exactly what Donne draws on in “The Canonization.” Future generations will ask lovers to “beg from above / A pattern of your love!” (l. 44–5). The couple represents an example that later lovers will hope to imitate, and the phrase “beg from above” adds to the metaphor by suggesting an act of intercession. The speaker and his lover are the ones who will “beg from above” by appealing to a superior being on behalf of their worshippers and requesting that this deity bless these followers with a “pattern,” an idealized model by which they might also attain perfect love.³² The deity referred to here is, of course, a god of love and not the Christian God appealed to in Catholic ritual, but the traditional practice of invocation clearly attracts Donne, and the metaphorical use of this outlawed practice produces a portrayal of the dead unconstrained by the more restrictive eschatological framework that had emerged with the Reformation. These lovers do not occupy some vague, unreachable, otherworldly domain after death, but long to remain passionately attached to their partners and involved in the world of the living.

Donne’s interest in the fate of the dead is also apparent in several of the “valediction” poems included in the *Songs and Sonets*. As Targoff has persuasively demonstrated, these poems “share a profound distaste for separation,” and it is in their response to this challenge that they are “most alive and vital.”³³ These poems begin by addressing the literal challenge of physical separation, but the act of saying farewell constantly foreshadows the possibility of death, and these occasions become a mere rehearsal for that final separation. In “The Expiration,” for example, the lovers’ last kiss is figured as their final

living breath which “sucks two soules, and vapors Both away” (2). The act of both leaving and telling his lover to leave (“going, and bidding, goe”) leaves the speaker feeling “double dead” (12). Donne uses death to help intensify the sense of discontinuity and irreparable loss that haunts separated lovers.

However, death is rarely presented in Donne’s writing as a terminal or hopeless condition. In fact some of the poems appear to argue the opposite. They compare and contrast separation and death with the goal of developing stronger arguments for continuity and survival. This strategy is peculiar because it would seem to exaggerate the challenge facing these lovers and transform a temporary obstacle to love into something more dramatic and spiritually imposing. Donne, however, treats death as a more manageable challenge, and his speakers are surprisingly well trained and well equipped for it. The famous image of departing on a voyage that occasions “A Valediction forbidding mourning,” for instance, begins by depicting a death scene, but the second part of the comparison in the second stanza makes the event less traumatic:

As virtuous men passe mildly away,
And whisper to their soules, to goe,
Whilst some of their sad friends doe say,
The breath goes now, and some say, no.

So let us melt, and make no noise,
No teare-floods, nor sigh-tempest move,
T’were prophanation of our joyes
To tell the layetie our love. (1–8)

The speaker actually follows Protestant custom here by arguing that personal assurance of salvation is an adequate source of comfort that eliminates the need for a more dramatic death. The analogy provides the lovers with a model of emotional restraint and suggests that a quiet farewell will be proof of their commitment to one another in the same way that a peaceful death is taken as evidence of a dying individual’s faith in the final destination of his or her soul. The speaker’s scorn for “teare-floods” proves that the couple’s relationship is “refined” (17) and is more than a purely physical or temporary phenomenon. The couple’s willingness to follow the dying man and “admit / Absence” (14–15) proves their commitment to one another just as the old man’s willing death ex-

presses his confidence in the eventual reunion of his body and soul in heaven. There is nothing shocking or controversial in the remedy for death presented here, but the significance is in the fact that the speaker turns to a metaphor of death for comfort and imagines it as a familiar problem that can be easily managed and overcome.

The associations between separation and death are even more extensive and integral to the speaker's romantic strategies in "A Valediction of my name, in the window." The relationship of the lovers in this poem is more vulnerable, and the images of death imply that the separation anticipated may be permanent. The speaker's use of death in this poem is also complicated by the fact that he clearly anticipates a return and reunion with his lover, and the death that he experiences must, therefore, be figured as a temporary condition or obstacle to love. The speaker hopes, in other words, to resume his relationship, and his goal is not simply to memorialize his love or project it into a timeless future as other of Donne's speakers do. Donne cleverly conveys this possibility by drawing on another Christian teaching about death, describing the speaker's return as a resurrection that will remake his self and reunite him both physically and spiritually with his beloved. The speaker expects a homecoming in which he will come back from the dead and his lover will "repair / And recompact" his "scatter'd body" (30–31).

In "A Valediction of my name," however, the final promise of a metaphorical resurrection does not ease the speaker's concerns about the intervening separation, which becomes the focus of his attention. The problem is that death as a form of separation is imagined as a period of waiting and helplessness during which the speaker lacks the ability to preserve his relationship. The mysterious inscription that the speaker leaves on the window as a pledge of his fidelity or "firmnesse" (2) becomes the primary symbolic link between the lovers, but the speaker also understands the limitations of this single reminder. This leads him to present a detailed set of instructions for his lover as he prepares her for his absence. During their separation, she assumes the role of someone grieving the death of a loved one; her actions are explicitly compared in the poem to practices that were performed by survivors during the period immediately following a death. The speaker tells his lover, for instance, that she should think of his inscription as a "deaths head" (22), a *memento mori* that will remind her of "Lovers mortalitie" (23). The speaker does not explain the function of this gift, but skulls and other *memento mori* emblems were commonly distributed

at funerals to family and close friends of the deceased in this period. Rings and other customized pieces of jewelry were an especially popular type of funeral gift, and Ralph Houlbrooke notes that these objects were typically engraved with a “death’s head” and “salutary reminders of death.”³⁴ The occasional nature of such gift-giving meant that these objects were more than just instructive tokens; they were also meant to mark the passing of a specific individual and provide survivors with a tangible sense of connection with the deceased.

Izaak Walton’s *Life of Dr. John Donne* (1640) reveals that Donne himself made use of this practice. According to Walton, “not long before his death” Donne had a set of rings custom made for his “dearest friends.”³⁵ Death was referenced on each ring not with a skull but in a carefully designed picture of the “body of Christ extended upon an anchor,” the anchor being an “emblem of Hope” (41). Walton explains that Donne’s purpose in designing and giving the rings was to provide his friends with something through which to remember him; the rings were “sent to many of his dearest friends, to be used as seals ... and kept as memorials of him, and his affection to them” (41). Houlbrooke’s remark that early modern Protestants used these exchanges as “private rites of commemoration” is especially appropriate in this instance, and he explains that these gestures of gift-giving “bear witness to the desire of those facing death or left bereft by it to sustain the life of memory.”³⁶

The “*given* death’s head” (emphasis mine) that the speaker of “A Valediction of my name” attempts to create for his lover can be read, then, as a visible reminder of the figurative death that the speaker undergoes by leaving, and can, the speaker hopes, aid her as she remembers her departed lover. The personalized meaning that the poem tries to attach to the window inscription is even more evident moments later: “Or thinke this ragged bony name to bee / My ruinous Anatomie” (23–24). The likening of a signature to a corpse reinforces the underlying correspondence in the poem between departure and dying, but this comparison also imposes the speaker more forcefully on his lover’s memory. The image of the speaker’s decaying flesh creates another reminder of his absence which is designed to provoke a reaction of grief and even shock from his lover.

Later in the poem the speaker encourages his lover to express her grief over his absence in a way that recalls another specific ritual response to death: “thou shouldst, till I returne, / Since I die daily, daily mourne” (41–2). The speaker does not specify exactly how this instruction should be carried out, but mourning in the seventeenth century was still regarded as a formal process in

which participants wore black gowns, excluded themselves from public events, and performed other actions for a set period of time after the funeral (a month in most cases, but sometimes a year).³⁷ What Donne seems drawn to in this application is the notion that mourning was a way for the living to experience a connection to the recently dead. In *The Pathway to Prayer and Pietie* (1610), Robert Hill defends mourning, for instance, on the grounds that it is a remedy against overlooking or neglecting the deceased. He argues that “by it [mourning] we keep a memory of our friend,” and that mourning is “a legacy of the dead to the living.”³⁸ The speaker in “A Valediction of my name” desires this kind of emotional legacy from his lover as a way of keeping his relationship secure, and he attempts to extend and formalize his lover’s grieving into a “daily” ceremony that both demonstrates and preserves her faithfulness. Mourning is part of his strategy to make her “more loving” and “more sad” (40) during his absence and to maintain some hold on her affections.

The references to mourning and other death practices in this particular poem are especially interesting because of the way in which they contradict conventional Protestant attitudes. In a post-Reformation context, mourning, *mementos moris* honouring the deceased, and virtually every other supportive ritual following death were explicitly defined in terms of their relevance to survivors rather than the dead. These and other practices that survived Protestant scrutiny were constantly evaluated to ensure that they were still functioning only for the comfort of the living. They were valuable as an aid to the living and a way to signify grief, but they could have no effect on the dead. In “A Valediction of my name,” however, Donne’s speaker reverses this formula. He is not literally facing death and his anxieties about the afterlife are only figurative, but he imagines a form of death in which the actions of the one he has left behind acquire the power either to bring him back from his absence or destroy their relationship and leave him in a state of neglect. The metaphorical connections between separation and death in the poem are not, in themselves, religiously heterodox, but the structure of the relationship between the speaker and his lover developed in these comparisons recalls pre-Reformation patterns of obligation and reciprocity, in which the dead come to rely on the living for support and remembrance. The speaker is seeking to attach himself more firmly to the world that he is leaving behind in the hope that his lover will “remembreth right” (59) and not forget him. Even as he rejects his plan at the end of the poem, he explains that his desperate impulses are brought on by the thought of

separation and confesses that “dying men talke often so” (66). The understanding of death in this poem seems largely uninfluenced by the Protestant attempt to redefine it as a quick and painless passage into a better existence.

Donne’s effort to re-imagine a relationship between the living and the dead and combine new and old methods of commemoration appears again in the “The Relique.” In this apparently private address to a lover, the speaker speculates about the possibility of romantic reunion after death and the future of their relationship more generally. Like “The Canonization,” “The Relique” deals with the process of remembrance that awaits the dead lovers, and it proposes a rather Catholic sounding form of commemoration. The poem’s opening stanza presents both another strategy for evading death and an anticipated disruption to this plan:

When my grave is broke up againe
Some second ghest to entertaine,
(For graves have learn’d that woman-head
To be more then one a Bed)
And he that digs it, spies
A bracelet of bright haire about the bone,
Will he not let’us alone,
And think that there a loving couple lies,
Who thought that this device might be some way
To make their soules, at the last busie day,
Meet at this grave, and make a little stay? (1–11)

The “bracelet of bright hair” around the speaker’s arm is designed to bring the couple together again on Judgment Day when their physical remains are being miraculously reassembled and resurrected. The speaker, however, is uncertain whether this small physical token will be enough in the meantime to prevent the gravedigger from invading and ruining the romantic sanctuary that they have tried to preserve.

It is important to consider the historical and religious significance of the actions taken by both the speaker and the gravedigger with respect to burial. The speaker’s anxiety about the possibility of being disinterred reflects changes in early modern burial practices and suggests how an older reverence for the burial site had been weakened as a result of certain reforms. Donne’s speaker

does not object to the violation of his grave on explicitly religious grounds, but the scene provides a vivid demonstration of one of the ways in which the dead could become spiritually and even physically alienated from the living in post-Reformation society. Protestant authorities attempting to undermine the Catholic teaching on death attacked the view that the exact location of burial had some bearing on the deceased's fate in the afterlife, and that burial within the church as opposed to the churchyard was preferable.³⁹ Such new beliefs, combined with the practical challenges of overcrowding during this period, threatened traditional burial practices and made the disruption of gravesites and exhumation of large cemetery plots easier to justify.⁴⁰ Recent research on burial suggests, however, that these developments were unwelcomed by the majority of the population who cared deeply about burial and continued to view the grave as a sacred and communal space. Harding, for instance, demonstrates that burial within the churchyard was still the norm in post-Reformation London and argues that the conservative "resistance of parish vestries to new burial practices" demonstrates "how little difference the Reformation had made to the attachment to traditional places of burial" (67). Donne reflects on the basic memorializing function of burial in *Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions* when he thinks about the poor who die alone and must wait for the church "Sexten" to find their bodies and "bury them in oblivion."⁴¹ They die with "their Grave-stone under them" (37) and must go to their death without even the modest benefits of recognition that burial provides: "they do but fill up the number of the dead in the Bill, but we shall never heare their Names, till wee reade them in the Book of life, with our owne" (36). Even when stripped of any intercessory or salvific function, burial is an observance that allows the living to acknowledge the dead during the interim period before the final resurrection. The speaker in "The Relique" is committed to the ideal of a dignified and undisturbed burial in proximity to his beloved, but the "increasing depersonalisation of the dead" associated with Protestantism is also registered in his awareness that the grave has become a somewhat precarious record of personal identity (Harding 84). Rather than request continued concern from the living after his death, the speaker's instinct is to brace himself against the intrusion of the gravedigger ("let us alone").

The bracelet also complicates the poem by introducing another unorthodox and illicit type of interaction among the dead. The speaker clearly attempts to remedy the threat of separation posed by physical death by seizing upon the

biblical promise of bodily resurrection, but the presence of the bracelet and its sexually suggestive description (“bright haire about the bone”) has led critics to see it as something that will allow the couple to experience a physical, sexual reunion, a “little stay” before the full process of resurrection is complete and final judgment can occur.⁴² The bracelet strategy is a defiant response to the widely held view that the resurrected body was a spiritual body incapable of sexual desire.⁴³ Later seventeenth-century writer John Dunton argues, for instance, against the need for family members to be buried in close proximity to one another, explaining that reunion was guaranteed and did not require any special effort. He asks, “Is it a matter of any moment in what place we lay the bodies of our deceased friends?” and answers by claiming that “souls shall not enjoy the less felicity for the remoter distance and separation of the bodies.”⁴⁴ The speaker in “The Relique,” however, is not content with a spiritual reunion of souls and attempts to bypass the restriction on sex by managing his own burial and taking a part of his lover’s body with him to his grave.

This moment in the poem should also be read in connection to the slowly changing perceptions of the afterlife that followed the Reformation. Protestants reacted against Catholic tradition by presenting a “theocentric” picture of heaven characterized by the “exclusive dominance of God.”⁴⁵ The reformers were mainly concerned with minimizing the prominence accorded to the saints and the Virgin Mary in earlier accounts of the afterlife, but the strong spiritual presence of the divine in their revised portraits of the afterlife often overshadowed the hope for all other types of reunion in heaven. The extreme position of sex in heaven was obviously rejected by the reformers, but some critics went even further. This sentiment was expressed by Donne’s own contemporary, Joseph Hall: “when we meet before the glorious throne of the God of Heaven, all the respects of our former earthly relations must utterly cease and be swallowed up of that beatifical presence, divine love, and infinitely blessed fruition of the Almighty!”⁴⁶ Sexual and even marital relations have no value in heaven, according to Hall: “here [in heaven] is no respect of blood; none of marriage: this grosser acquaintance and pleasure is for the paradise of Turks, not the heaven of Christians.”⁴⁷

In “The Relique,” the intense and isolating Protestant encounter with the divine suggested by Hall is clearly absent from the speaker’s vision of the resurrection, which becomes a final opportunity for him to enjoy the company of his lover. Donne pursues a similar idea in “The Anniversarie,” in which the physi-

cal separation imposed by death is a “divorce” (12) for the couple as they “must leave at last in death, these eyes and eares” (15). The translation from body to soul, is accepted more easily in this poem, but the speaker still complains that this new spiritual state deprives the couple of their unique passion as lovers — “then wee shall be thoroughly blest, / But wee no more, then all the rest” (21–2) — and he concludes with the hope that they can sustain their love while they are alive and delay their entry into heaven.⁴⁸

The placement of the bracelet inside the grave early in “The Relic” also suspiciously evokes the ancient folk and Catholic custom of burying the corpse with a small charm or memento that will aid the dead in his or her journey through the afterlife. The image of this charm helps to explain why later in the poem the remains in the grave are mistaken for a relic by the gravedigger. Donne depicts a similar gesture in “The Funerall,” where the speaker again attaches a strand of a woman’s hair to his arm in the hope that it will miraculously preserve his body from decay. The speaker plays with the religious connotations of this image, claiming that he, as “Loves martyr,” must bury the strand of hair and prevent it from causing others to fall in love with this merciless woman. As he says, “it might breed idolatrie, / If into others hands these Reliques came” (19–20).

The religious associations attached to burial tokens are somewhat obscure by the time Donne was writing and his reference seems partly humorous, but there were reports in the seventeenth-century, for instance, of mourners placing a penny in the mouth of the deceased to be used as payment to St. Peter, or putting crucifixes inside the coffin, or treating the deceased’s body with salt or holy water to prevent it from returning as a ghost.⁴⁹ Claire Gittings cites a sixteenth-century injunction calling on clergy to prevent any superstitious objects from being “put secretly upon or about the dead body; or else whether any pardons, cloths, relics, or such other be buried with the dead body.”⁵⁰ Donne’s bracelet is clearly not intended to help safeguard the speaker’s soul, and there is perhaps something ironic about the use of this object for such a seemingly carnal purpose. This simple object nevertheless functions as a defense against the threat of dissolution, physical and spiritual, which would cut the speaker off from his beloved. The wearing of the bracelet is a private commemorative ritual that flaunts a number of the Protestant restrictions targeting older practices.

The speaker’s attempt to create a sacred and private space after death in which to meet his lover opens up an even more fantastic possibility in the second stanza. There, he imagines his disinterment occurring during a period in

which the Roman Catholic Church has apparently been restored. The poem suddenly moves outside of a Protestant context, and what results is a very different kind of encounter:

If this fall in a time, or land,
Where mis-devotion doth command,
Then, he that digges us up, will bring
Us, to the Bishop and the King,
To make us Reliques; then
Thou shalt be'a Mary Magdalen, and I
A something else thereby;
All women shall adore us, and some men;
And since at such time, miracles are sought,
I would have that age by this paper taught
What miracles wee harmless lovers wrought. (12–22)

The fact that the speaker is responding to a Catholic society similar to the one Donne himself was raised in but later rejected has led some readers to interpret these lines as describing the speaker's attempt to distance himself from, and at the same time rejoin, this welcoming community.⁵¹ Donne is clearly unwilling or unable to imagine a painless reentry into what he now sees as a culture of "mis-devotion," and he mocks the throngs of mostly female worshippers whose literal mindedness and hunger for "miracles" lead them to equate his lover's hair with Mary Magdalen and his own bones (that "something else thereby") with Christ.⁵² Donne's intention in evoking this Catholic context, however, is not primarily to mock it. These imagined worshippers are present in the poem to witness the power of the couple's love as it persists after death and assumes a function like that of Catholic relics by bringing the living into contact with the dead. The speaker's criticism of his new audience is tempered as the poem continues, and the satire evolves into an attempt to teach and correct their misperceptions by means of the "paper" that he will include with his remains. The poem does not endorse their desire to consecrate the speaker's remains and take advantage of the supposed spiritual benefits attributed to relics. At the same time, however, this audience's belief in a communion of saints that extends beyond the grave and their antiquated sense of obligation to the dead is what enables the speaker to envision a setting in which he and his lover will

be remembered and honoured, even if it is for reasons other than those first suspected by the worshippers.

The Catholic model of commemoration is only briefly revived in this passage before it is cancelled by the speaker's objections, but the poem develops a reciprocity between the speaker and an imagined religious community that resembles an older and now rejected ideal. The medieval practice of worshipping saints was based on the assumption that the saints provide the living with specific types of spiritual assistance in direct return for gifts and other acts of devotion. The somewhat satiric account, in which the speaker's bones and the bracelet of hair are mistakenly revered, parodies this type of exchange. However, the other "relic" left behind, the text of the poem (or perhaps "this" refers only to the third stanza), seems to acknowledge and reinforce the sense of connection between the dead couple and their new found followers even as it redefines the relationship. The speaker's act of giving his future hosts the "miraculous" account of his mistress resembles a standard late medieval practice in which members of the laity would textually inscribe their name in primers, devotional tracts, candles, chalices or other sacred items and give these gifts to the parish. This was a way to "contribute to the dignity and beauty of parochial worship," and the individual also "expected to be held in perpetual memory within the parish" in return for his or her gift.⁵³ The speaker's gift has a similar double function. He attempts to describe his lover and "tell what a miracle shee was" (33), offering her to his future readers as an exemplar of love, but this gift also perpetuates their memory by means of a living and receptive audience.

Conclusion: Donne's "A nocturnall upon S. Lucies day"

The deaths in the *Songs and Sonets* are largely imagined or metaphorical, and this detachment of the poet from the reality of dying may help to explain the free and playful ways in which his speakers represent the dead. A more immediate and profound sense of loss is described, however, in "A nocturnall upon S. Lucies day, Being the shortest day," written, it is widely believed, in 1617, in response to the death of Donne's wife, Anne More.⁵⁴ The occasion links this poem to "Since she whom I lov'd," but the treatment of separation in "A nocturnall" differs significantly from that of the sonnet. In "A nocturnall" the speaker continues the strategy employed in other *Songs and Sonets* of turning to ritual

structures and metaphors both to express his loss and to search for ways of maintaining some form of communion with the dead. The speaker's conscious elaboration of the liturgical meaning associated with the date of the poem provides a subtle but important consolation at the end of his devastating account of grief and absence.⁵⁵

The religious holiday or "saints day" identified in the title was designated in the traditional church calendar as December 13,⁵⁶ and this date combined with the nighttime setting helps establish the bleak associations of darkness, cold, and death that dominate the poem. The speaker's grief is matched by the winter landscape and the death that surrounds him:

The worlds whole sap is sunke:
The generall balme th'hydroptique earth hath drunk,
Whither, as to the beds-feet, life is shrunke,
Dead and enterr'd. (5–8)

The "earth" is pictured on its deathbed, with its remaining strength or "balm" having been drained down to its feet at the end of the bed. The speaker claims, however, that these signs of natural decay "all ...seeme to laugh, / Compar'd with mee" (8–9). This begins the long and complex metaphor of alchemical death and annihilation that the speaker uses to characterize his condition now that his lover has died. The couple's earlier experience of "absence" (26) from one another had "made [them] carcasses" (27), and this new and more permanent separation diminishes the speaker to a point of almost total "nothingnesse" (15): "I am re-begot / Of absence, darknesse, death; things which are not" (17–18). The possibility of death anticipated and imagined in other poems in the *Songs and Sonets* is realized here, and the effects are devastating.

But as the speaker in "A nocturnall" seems to reach out to an imagined audience, at least one important pattern found in those poems discussed here recurs. He describes himself in the opening stanza as an "Epitaph" (8) of the dead or dying things around him; even in his desolate and deathlike state, the speaker chooses a metaphor that opens up the possibility of remaining tentatively attached to the living, as he instructs future lovers to learn from his experience: "Study me then, you who shall lovers bee / At the next world, that is, at the next Spring" (10–11). Exactly what these future lovers learn from this "Epitaph" is unclear, as the speaker later tells them to simply "fetch new lust"

(40), but the speaker is again led to open this poem of private grief up to a broader public that will survive both his death and the death of his lover. The speaker's desire to be remembered persists even when grief appears to have absorbed every other thought or feeling.

In the closing stanza, the familiar impulse to outwit death appears thwarted when the speaker acknowledges that his beloved will not return: "nor will my Sunne renew" (37).⁵⁷ The speaker appears to be reaching a state of resignation similar to that described in "Since she whome I lovd," as he accepts her permanent place in heaven.

Since shee enjoys her long nights festivall,
Let mee prepare towards her, and let mee call
This houre her Vigill, and her Eve, since this
Both the yeares, and the dayes deep midnight is. (42–45)

But the speaker discovers the option to "prepare towards her" and redirect his human affections into a new spiritual commitment that also allows him to remember her and eventually join her in heaven.⁵⁸ This closing ritual gesture and utterance serves as a final means of maintaining an attachment to the dead. In attempting to merge his final statement with the liturgical occasion of the poem, the speaker shifts, again, into a ritualized mode of address. In "Since she whome I lovd," the speaker is simply left to question himself and the "jealous" God who has claimed his wife, but by declaring this night her "festival," the speaker imagines her as a patron saint whom he can remember and even call on during the "long night" that comes before their possible reunion. The performance of this "nocturnall," or nighttime prayer vigil, becomes a ritual to ease the pain of separation during a long and uncertain waiting period.

The distinction between the consolation in "A nocturnall" and the starker sense of absence considered earlier in "Since she whome I lovd" is not surprising given Donne's technique of utilizing different speakers and personae in his poetry, but it is important to recognize again that such vacillations are suggestive of the deeper religious uncertainties that characterize representations of the dead in the wake of Protestant reforms. These two poems return us to Greenblatt's important claim about the depth of early modern culture's spiritual obsession with the dead; Donne's writing is like Shakespeare's in demonstrating how the "psychological" challenge of death in this period is "constructed almost

entirely out of the theological, and specifically out of the issue of remembrance that ... lay at the heart of the crucial early-sixteenth-century debate about Purgatory" (229). But Donne responds differently to the Protestant disregard for the dead that is so debilitating in *Hamlet*. His *Songs and Sonets* register a sense of loss but are not consumed by nostalgia and are able to join an ongoing debate as they test the limits of what could be thought and said about the dead after the Reformation.

Notes

1. Eamon Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars: Traditional Religion in England, 1400–1580* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), p. 475.
2. Stephen Greenblatt, *Hamlet in Purgatory* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), pp. 8–9, 40–46.
3. For a more developed critique of this issue and other aspects of Greenblatt's work, see Sarah Beckwith, "Stephen Greenblatt's *Hamlet* and the Forms of Oblivion," *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 33.2 (2003), pp. 261–80.
4. The influence of the "secularization thesis" in early modern criticism is explained and documented by Arthur F. Marotti and Ken Jackson, in "The Turn to Religion in Early Modern English Studies," *Criticism* 46.1 (2004), pp. 171–74. The tendency of equating Protestant reform with secularization has been especially pronounced in literary studies of death. In *The Rest is Silence: Annihilation as Death in the Renaissance* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), Robert Watson analyzes the "mortality crisis" in Jacobean drama and poetry and argues that the "Protestant Reformation" (4) helped to create this problem by "shifting the locus of redemption from group ritual to personal conscience" (5). Michael Neill is even more explicit about the secular bias that informs his study of Renaissance tragedy in *Issues of Death: Mortality and Identity in English Renaissance Tragedy* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997). Stage tragedy, according to Neill, develops in response to the "wholesale displacement of the dead from their familiar place in the order of things by the Protestant abolition of purgatory and ritual intercession" (46), but he insists that critics should focus their attention on what was emerging: "we need to look not at the mechanisms that were designed to keep death in its place, but at those which attempted to assign it a new one" (48). A similar perspective informs the analysis of death in the following works: Dennis Kay, *Melodious Tears:*

- The English Funeral Elegy from Spenser to Milton* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990); Dennis Kezar, *Guilty Creatures: Renaissance Poetry and the Ethics of Authorship* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001); and Patricia Phillippy, *Women, Death and Literature in post-Reformation England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p. 9.
5. Matthew Greenfield, "The Cultural Functions of English Renaissance Elegy," *English Literary Renaissance* 28.1 (1998), p. 86.
 6. Scholarship on Donne and death covers a range of issues and perspectives, but many critics have treated Donne as a relatively conventional early modern thinker and writer on this topic. For examples, see Bette Anne Doebler, *Rooted in Sorrow: Dying in Early Modern England* (Rutherford: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1994); Arnold Stein, *The House of Death: Messages from the English Renaissance* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986); Barbara Lewalski, *Donne's Anniversaries and the Poetry of Praise: The Creation of a Symbolic Mode* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973); Dennis Kay, *Melodious Tears*; Elizabeth M. A. Hodgson, *Gender and the Sacred Self in John Donne* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1999). An important recent exception is Ramie Targoff's *John Donne: Body and Soul* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008); see especially her chapters on *The Anniversaries* and the sermons in which Donne's view on the separation of the soul from the body is shown to be "contrary to the standard position of his church" (80). For important psychologically-oriented studies that emphasize the abnormal aspects of Donne's fascination with death, see John Carey, *John Donne: Life, Mind and Art* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981); and Watson, *The Rest is Silence*, pp. 156–251. Both helpfully trace Donne's morbid tendencies back to his formative early experiences, but in doing so they also tend to isolate Donne's writing from its contemporary religious context and underestimate the extent to which meditating on death was seen as a normal and even exemplary practice.
 7. In *The English Poetic Epitaph: Commemoration and Conflict from Jonson to Wordsworth* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991), Joshua Scodel notices a similar preoccupation in Donne's "Epitaph on Himself." According to Scodel, the strange relationship between the dead speaker and future readers in this poem defies convention and produces an "intense spiritual reciprocity between the living and the dead well outside the mainstream of both English poetic tradition and Protestant theology" (114).

8. M. Thomas Hester, "this cannot be said" A Preface to the Reader of Donne's Lyrics," *Christianity and Literature* 30 (1990), pp. 365–85; Achsah Guibbory, "Donne, Milton, and Holy Sex," *Milton Studies* 32 (1995), pp. 3–21. For a version of this argument that puts less emphasis on Donne's Catholicism, see Regina Schwartz, *Sacramental Poetics at the Dawn of Secularism: When God Left the World* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008), pp. 87–116. I have borrowed the phrase "residual Catholicism" from Jeanne Shami, who discusses and contextualizes this aspect of Donne's writing in an important essay on Donne's religion, "'Trying to Walk on Logs in Water': John Donne, Religion, and the Critical Tradition," *Renaissance and Reformation* 25.4 (2001), pp. 81–99.
9. "Facing Death," in *The Cambridge Companion to John Donne*, ed. Achsah Guibbory (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), pp. 222. Targoff offers a more serious assessment of the *Songs and Sonets* in *John Donne: Body and Soul*, pp. 49–78.
10. Peter Marshall, *Beliefs and the Dead in Reformation England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 141.
11. Edwin Sandys, *Sermons and Miscellaneous Pieces by Archbishop Sandys*, ed. John Ayre (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1842), p. 162.
12. *The Works of James Pilkington*, ed. James Scholefield (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1842), p. 318.
13. "An Homilie or Sermon concerning Prayer," *Certaine Sermons or Homilies, Appointed to be Read in Churches In the Time of Queen Elizabeth I (1547–1571)*, eds. Mary Ellen Rickey and Thomas B. Stroup (Gainesville, Florida: Scholars' Facsimiles & Reprints, 1968), vol. II, p. 121. Page numbers will hereafter be given in parentheses in the main text.
14. William Allen, *A Defense and Declaration of the Catholike Churches Doctrine touching Purgatory* (Antwerp, 1565), p. 135.
15. For an important study of the Catholic milieu in which Donne was raised, see Dennis Flynn, *Donne and the Ancient Catholic Nobility* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995).
16. The arguments for this date and for the dating of Donne's "Holy Sonnets" more generally are developed in Helen Gardner's edition, *The Divine Poems*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978), pp. xxxvii–xlix, 77–78.
17. *The Complete Poetry of John Donne*, ed. John T. Shawcross (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1967). All further references to Donne's poetry are from this edition unless otherwise noted.

18. R. Clifton Spargo, *The Ethics of Mourning: Grief and Responsibility in Elegiac Literature* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004), p. 97.
19. For readings of the poem that emphasize the speaker's lack of fulfillment and resolution, see Achsah Guibbory, "Fear of 'loving more': Death and the Loss of Sacramental Love," in *John Donne's 'desire of more': the Subject of Anne More Donne in His Poetry*, ed. M. Thomas Hester (London: Associated University Press, 1996), pp. 204–27; and Theresa DiPasquale, "Ambivalent Mourning in 'Since she whome I lovd,'" in *John Donne's 'desire of more'*, pp. 45–56. Guibbory and DiPasquale both argue that Anne functions as a human sacrament for Donne and that he feels her death as both a spiritual and sexual loss.
20. *The Sermons of John Donne*, eds. Evelyn Simpson and George Potter, 10 vols. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1953–62), vol. 4, p. 331.
21. *The Sermons of John Donne*, vol. 7, pp. 164–189.
22. Stein is one of several critics who have read this line differently, using the punctuation in Grierson's edition to argue that God is acting "for" or on behalf of the speaker by assisting in his eventual reunion with Anne in heaven: "God's offer of love quietly includes Anne and is a gracious act of divine love, not a form of compensation" (290). The problem, however, is that the idea of God working to reunite the lovers is inconsistent with the portrayal of God in the last four lines, where God assumes an adversarial stance to all other loves in the speaker's life.
23. See Mary Papazian, "John Donne's Secular and Sacred Reactions to Loss: From Nothingness to God's Tender Jealousy," in *The Sacred and Profane in English Renaissance Literature*, ed. Mary A Papazian (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2008); Papazian provides a quotation from a sermon by Donne suggesting the positive and comforting implications of God's jealousy (175), but there seems to be no evidence within the poem to suggest that the speaker experiences this sense of comfort.
24. Arthur Marotti, *John Donne: Coterie Poet* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1986), p. 147. This reference to "speakers" seems especially important when discussing the provocative religious ideas and images in the *Songs and Sonets*, and my reading follows the tradition developed by scholars of approaching Donne's speakers as personae rather than biographical representations. For analysis of the complex and shifting use of "voices" in the *Songs and Sonets*, see Patricia Garland Pinka, *This dialogue of one: the Songs and sonnets of John Donne* (Alabama: University of Alabama Press, 1982). For other studies that have warned against overly biographical readings of Donne's speakers, see Paul Harland, "Dramatic Technique and Personae

- in Donne's Sermons," *English Literary Heritage* 53 (1986), pp. 709–26; Paul R. Sellin, "The Mimetic Poetry of Jack and John Donne: A Field Theory for the Amorous and the Divine," in *Sacred and Profane: Secular and Devotional Interplay in Early Modern British Literature*, ed. Helen Wilcox, Richard Todd, and Alasdair Macdonald (Amsterdam: VU University Press, 1996), pp. 163–72.
25. Vanessa Harding, *The Dead and the Living in Paris and London* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p. 157.
 26. John Weever, *Ancient Funerall Monuments* (London, 1631), p. 10.
 27. Donne's own notes indicate that this sermon was originally preached in The Hague in 1619 and later revised into its current version in 1630. For a fuller discussion of the circumstances surrounding the preaching and writing of this sermon, see Simpson and Potter's "Introduction" in *The Sermons of John Donne*, vol. 2, pp. 38–39.
 28. *The Sermons of John Donne*, vol. 2, p. 296.
 29. *A Catechisme or Christian Doctrine* (1567), Scholar Press Facsimile Reprints of 1599 edition published by Jacobus Ledisma, ed. D. M. Rogers (Menstron: Scholar Press, 1969), p. 15.
 30. In *Christianity in the West* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), John Bossy argues that devotion to the saints plays a crucial role in defining late medieval Christianity as a "body of people" as opposed to what it would become for the reformers, a "body of beliefs" (171). The saints' primary purpose was to provide "channels for God's favour and friendship" (12) and extend "social relations beyond the frontiers of merely human society" (13).
 31. In *A Catholike Appeale for Protestants* (London, 1610), Thomas Morton articulates the Protestant position on the saints in England: the saints still have a place within the spiritual community and "pray for the Church militant in general," but they "do not know the prayers of the living." For a more detailed discussion of different positions on this issue in England, see Anthony Milton, *Catholic and Reformed: the Roman and Protestant Churches in English Protestant Thought, 1600–1640* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), pp. 206–08. To demonstrate the range of opinions, Milton cites a Laudian like Richard Montagu, who accepted "Rome's defence of the invocation of saints" (206) and attempted to "exculpate it from any impiety" in his own writing (208).
 32. This reading is suggested in a note by John Shawcross, *The Complete Poetry of John Donne*, p. 98.
 33. Targoff, p. 50. Targoff's analysis differs from my own in its emphasis on the separation of body and soul as the central concern or anxiety in Donne's writing that

informs his treatment of all other separations: "But however painful Donne's expression of loss for his loved ones may be, the single most agonizing farewell for him is not between two people. It is between the body and soul" (1). This means, of course, that death is not seen as a central concern in the *Songs and Sonets*, and for Targoff "the fear of death" becomes a truly animating force for Donne in "his devotional verse" (50).

34. Ralph Houlbrooke, *Death, Religion and the Family in England, 1480–1750* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 252; see also Nigel Llewellyn, *The Art of Death: Visual Culture in the English Death Ritual, c.1550–c.1800* (London: Reaktion Books, 1991), pp. 86, 95–96.
35. Izaak Walton, *The Life of Dr. John Donne* (London: Folio Press, 1988), p. 41.
36. Houlbrooke, pp. 254, 252.
37. Houlbrooke, pp. 220–54.
38. Robert Hill, *The Pathway to Prayer and Pietie* (1610), p. 276.
39. "Papists are both wicked in teaching people, that one place is more holy than another to be buried in, as in the church rather than the churchyard, and near the high altar rather than in the body of the church; and they are thieves also in picking poor men's purses for the same" (Bishop James Pilkington, *The Works of James Pilkington*, ed. Rev. James Schofield [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, for the Parker Society, 1842], p. 317).
40. Harding, pp. 64–68.
41. John Donne, *Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions*. ed. Anthony Raspa (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), p. 36.
42. On the sexual connotations of the poem, see Dayton Haskin, "On Trying to Make the Record Speak More about Donne's Love Poems," in *John Donne's 'desire of more': The Subject of Anne More in his Poetry*, ed. M. Thomas Hester (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1996), pp. 39–65; Maurine Sabine, "No Marriage in Heaven: John Donne, Anne Donne, and the Kingdom come," in *John Donne's 'desire of more,'* pp. 228–55; and Achsah Guibbory, "'The Relique,' The Song of Songs, and Donne's *Songs and Sonets*," *John Donne Journal*, 15 (1996), pp. 23–44. Although they disagree or are uncertain about whether or not love in this poem has been consummated, they all read the bracelet as an emblem of sexual desire, not simply a symbolic memento. For a reading of the poem that focuses on the unreadability of this and other details, see M. Thomas Hester, "'Let me love': Reading the Sacred 'currant' of Donne's Profane Lyrics," in *Sacred and Profane: Secular and Devotional Interplay in Early Modern British Literature*, esp. pp. 132–37.

43. Dayton Haskin reads the speaker's scheme as a defensive response specifically to Mark 12:18–27 and Luke 20:27–40, passages in which Jesus suggests that “sex [will be] abolished in the new heaven and the new earth” (Haskin, 60).
44. John Dunton, *A Mourning Ring, In Memory of Your Departed Friend* (1692), pp. 103–4, 290, as cited in David Cressy, *Birth, Marriage, and Death: Ritual, Religion, and the Life-Cycle in Tudor and Stuart England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 464.
45. Bernhard Langer and Colleen McDannell, *Heaven: a History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), p. 146.
46. *The Works of Joseph Hall* (Oxford: Talboys, 1837), vol. 8, p. 262.
47. *The Works of Joseph Hall*, vol. 6, p. 197.
48. Anthony Low makes a similar point about these and other works in the *Songs and Sonets*: “Donne treats the love of God and human love as mutually exclusive and fundamentally incompatible. In these poems God's eternity must wait on the private eternity of the two lovers” (*The Reinvention of Love: Poetry, Politics and Culture from Sidney to Milton* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993], pp. 73–74).
49. See Cressy, p. 402; and Claire Gittings, *Death, Burial and the Individual in Early Modern England* (London: Routledge, 1984), p. 111.
50. Gittings, p. 43.
51. Carey argues that “Donne's responsiveness to the mystery of saints and relics is unmistakably the harvest of his upbringing in the Roman Church” (45).
52. For commentary on the critical debate about the phrase “something else” as an allusion to “Jesus Christ,” see Thomas Docherty, *John Donne, Undone* (London: Methuen, 1987), p. 175.
53. Duffy, pp. 330, 134; see also Clive Burgess, “‘Longing to be prayed for’: death and commemoration in an English parish in the later Middle Ages,” in *The Place of the Dead: Death and Remembrance in Late Medieval and Early Modern Europe*, eds. Bruce Gordon and Peter Marshall (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp. 44–65.
54. For support for this dating, see Shawcross's note, *The Complete Poetry of John Donne*, p. 402.
55. In emphasizing the speaker's constructive use of the liturgical associations, I am arguing for an element of hope that many readings of the poem have questioned or denied. See Guibbory, “Fear of ‘loving more’”; Sabine, “No Marriage in Heaven,”

- pp. 228–55; and Peter Wiggins, “Preparing Towards Lucy: ‘A Nocturnall’ as Palin-ode,” *Studies in Philology* 84 (1987), pp. 483–93.
56. For discussions of the liturgical context and parallels, see Kate Gartner Frost, “‘Preparing towards her’: Contexts of A Nocturnall upon S. Lucies Day,” in *John Donne’s ‘desire of more’: The Subject of Anne More in his Poetry*, ed. M. Thomas Hester (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1996), pp. 149–71.
 57. Wiggins claims that the despair in “A nocturnall” makes it fundamentally different from the more idealistic poems in the *Songs and Sonets* (pp. 489–490). There is a significant difference in mood and tone, but the poem’s incorporation of this ritual gesture establishes an important structural similarity to other poems in this collection.
 58. I am indebted to Frost’s detailed analysis of the liturgical parallels, but I disagree with her claim that the poem’s use of a liturgical structure resolves the speaker’s crisis and indicates his acceptance of a now priestly or spiritual vocation.