

Arrogance and Metaphysical Conceits in Donne's *Holy Sonnets*

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The typical relationship between God and man is one of helpless supplication. For example, in George Herbert's "The Altar," the speaker's stance is humbly suppliant, submitting himself to God at the altar in the hopes "... That, if I chance to hold my peace, / These stones to praise thee may not cease" (13-14). The speaker succumbs entirely to God and offers himself as a servant. John Donne in his *Holy Sonnets* offers an interesting contrast. In his *Holy Sonnets* "Thou hast made me" and "Batter my heart," although Donne's speaker acknowledges being feeble and reliant on God to help him refrain from temptation and abstain from sin, the speaker employs a commanding and authoritative tone with God in an attempt to convince God to assist him, an approach that is seemingly contradictory to the meek and humble image of a child of God. In making his appeal to God, the speaker implements metaphysical conceits in order to describe the relationship between God, man, and sin and to command God to save him from sin through the use of force.

Both sonnets illustrate the speaker's weakness and dependency on God's aid in order to resist temptation and to abstain from sinful indulgences, yet Donne's speaker immediately assumes a commanding tone. In "Thou hast made me," for example, the speaker tells God to "Repair me now" (2) - to correct his flaws-for fear "my feeble flesh doth waste / By sin in it, which it towards hell doth weigh" (7-8). The speaker is afraid that sin is consuming him, and he may be fated to suffer the torments of hell, so he instructs God to assist him immediately "for now mine end doth haste" (2). In "Batter my heart" the speaker demonstrates his dependency on

God with the use of paradox. He tells God in the final lines of the sonnet that "Except you enthrall me, never shall I be free / Nor ever chaste, except you ravish me" (1314). The speaker suggests that alone, he is not capable of resisting sin, but rather than remaining humbly suppliant, the speaker again demands quick action from his God by insisting God coerce him to a virtuous lifestyle by means of violent force.

It is important to note the speaker in both sonnets clarifies his argument and bridge the gap between humility and control by using metaphysical conceits to describe the relationship between God, man, and sin. When the speaker in "Thou hast made me" orders God to "Repair me now," he implies a relationship in which God is the engineer, man is the machine he created, and sin is the virus or malfunction that causes the machine to be defective or imperfect. The speaker in this *Holy Sonnet* also declares God is "like adamant" drawing "mine iron heart" (14), which suggests man contains metal in his framework and further supports the assertion that the speaker is like a machine created by God. He is flawed by sin and God, as creator of the faulty machine, is responsible for fixing it. In "Batter my heart" the speaker equates himself to a "usurped town" (5) that "Labor[s] to admit you [God]" (6) but is occupied by sin. The speaker wishes to admit God but requires his help in order to be successful. He also compares himself to a bride who loves God" and would be loved fain; / But am betrothed unto your enemy [sin]" (9-10).

The images in both "Batter my heart" and "Thou hast made me" imply total helplessness on the part of the speaker; the task of redeeming the speaker is all God's to accomplish. However, like an authority, not a humble child of God, the speaker gives God exact instructions on how he should approach saving him from his wicked nature. Simply stated, he gives God an ultimatum, "Either force me to relinquish my sinful ways or I will be consumed by sin."

In an effort to convince God to pity his fragile, wretched state and facilitate his redemption, the speaker in Donne's *Holy Sonnets* "Thou hast made me" and "Batter my heart" chooses to utilize a commanding attitude when he speaks to God rather than to address the deity in a manner appropriate of a humble servant. The speaker uses violent imagery when ordering God to rescue him to emphasize how desperately he requires assistance; he also makes use of metaphysical conceits to describe his relationship with God and sin - more specifically to demonstrate his tragic state torn between his love for God and his lust for sinful indulgences and worldly pleasures. The combination of violent imagery and commanding point of view makes God's role in redeeming the speaker crucial and emphasizes the importance of God in his life. These techniques of metaphysical poetry help create and emphasize the despondent situations and pleas to God for salvation that are characteristic of Donne's *Holy Sonnets*.

Works Cited

Abrams, et. al. *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*. 7th ed. Vol. 1. New York: Norton, 2000.

Donne, John. "Batter my heart." Abrams. 1271.

---. "Thou hast made me." Abrams. 1268.

Herbert, George. "The Altar." Abrams. 1597.

Dr. Faust's Comments: *Besides his grammatical correctness and his extremely clear, coherent and mature style of writing, what impressed me about Mr. Hall's paper was his excellent use of evidence from the poems to prove his thesis, and the quotes he uses are handled deftly for effect. He demonstrates a clear understanding of metaphysical conceit and, better yet can explain the*

literary device to the reader. His concise use of language contrasts the two poems on pertinent convincing points without an unnecessary word or phrase in the process. Papers like this one make it all worthwhile.

