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JOHN DONNE AND THE PARADOX: AN ANALYSIS OF “BATTER MY HEART, THREE-PERSON’D GOD”

By Lily Daniels

A paradox is a statement that appears contradictory but ultimately makes sense. “Sonnet XIV: Batter my heart, three person’d God” (1632) by John Donne reflects the many paradoxes within the Bible and Christian faith. Read within the context of his religious beliefs and the rest of the Holy Sonnets, “Batter my heart, three-person’d God” is a poem that exhibits Donne’s theology of God and the process of salvation. The speaker affirms that the power of the triune God is required to break the bonds of sin. He finds freedom from sin in submitting to God’s will, and he finds innocence in God’s act of saving love (lines 13-14). In the Bible, there exists a tension between the holy nature of God who judges and the merciful nature of God who also saves. Similarly, in this poem, there exists a tension between conflicting poetic devices. Donne uses diction, sound devices and form, figurative language, and explicit paradoxes to illustrate these conflicting statements about the Christian life. Since the abstract meaning of words is more important than their literal meanings, the poem demonstrates that the speaker eventually understands these complex, theological concepts.

Donne was an Anglican clergyman who had a deep understanding of God and the Bible, and he wrote many religious and secular works in the seventeenth century (Poetry Foundation). The Holy Sonnets are a collection of nineteen religious poems published after Donne’s death. Written around 1610, amid a time of religious conflict in England and a time of personal trials, they are a product of Donne’s “devout fitts [that] come and go away” (Sonnet XIX, line 12). The subject matter of the Holy Sonnets revolves around God, sin, judgment, mercy, and salvation.
Despite his reoccurring fears and self-doubts, the speaker grounds himself with what he believes to be true about God.

Most of these sonnets, including “Batter my heart, three-person’d God,” follow the Petrarchan sonnet form. They are written in the first person. The speaker is likely Donne himself or, at the least, a character heavily based on his thoughts and experiences. For instance, the attitudes and beliefs of the speaker align with much of Donne’s other religious writings including “The Latanie.” A litany is a written prayer used during worship services. In addition, in Sonnet XVII, the speaker mourns the death of an unnamed woman “whom [he] lov’d” (Sonnet XVII, line 1), and that poem is thought to have been written shortly after the death of Donne’s wife (Poetry Foundation).

According to Donne’s interpretation of the Bible, as reflected by the Holy Sonnets, the triune God consists of the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. God made the world and gives life, but mankind sins against their Creator in rebellion (Sonnet XII). God sent his Son, Christ, to be crucified and to deliver man from the devil and the bonds of sin (Sonnet XI). The Holy Ghost dwells in those who submit to God (Sonnet II). At the end of the world, a final judgment will occur. Those who faithfully submitted themselves to God will be glorified, but without God’s grace, no one can resist sin (Sonnet VII). The speaker fears that he will be judged harshly and that his sin will drag him to his death (Sonnet I). This is why he demands so fiercely for the three-person’d God to “batter [his] heart” (Sonnet XIV, line 1).

By choosing familiar words that allude to abstract theological concepts, Donne employs diction to strengthen the theme of conflicting statements about God. Beginning with the opening line, “Batter my heart, three-person’d God” contains many vivid words with violent and sexual overtones. The literal meanings of these words convey both the intense force required to
overcome the devil’s hold and the speaker’s devout love for God. However, the speaker is not asking God to physically “burn” (line 4) or “enthral” (line 13) him. Instead, Donne uses the words figuratively, and the connotations of these words would have been recognizable to most religious people of his day. For example, the Bible uses the image of refining gold with fire to reflect the concept of how God tests and purifies a person’s heart (Zech. 13.9). Since the speaker’s belief “proves weake or untrue” (line 8), he demands that God make his heart clean. The Bible also uses the concrete image of slavery to represent the abstract concept of people under the power of sin and the devil, but it also uses this image to state the importance of slave-like devotion to following God’s commandments (Rom. 1.1, 1 Pet 2.16). Since these Biblical passages contain conflicting statements, Donne alludes to them with his precise word choice.

Similarly, the phrases “betroth’d unto your enemie” (line 10) and “nor ever chast, except you ravish mee” (line 12) alludes to passages of scripture which say that marriage and sex are designed by God to mirror his covenant promises to his people (Eph. 5.22-33). Followers are sometimes referred to as the bride of Christ, and the book of Revelation speaks of a wedding feast (Rev. 19.7-9). However, when mankind decided to rebel against God, their perfect relationship was severed. Those who fall victim to the devil’s temptation are called adulterous (Jas 4.4), and as Donne suggests, God must continually “untie or breake that knot againe” (line 11) and “take [us] to [him]” (line 12) until the end times when the relationship is permanently restored.

In addition to diction, Donne contrasts form and sound devices to create tension that reflects the content of the poem. Sonnets are usually associated with love poems, and the adherence to this strict structure indicates the speaker’s devotion to God. Throughout the poem there are amorous undertones which are most apparent after the turn between the octet and the
sestet: “Yet dearly ‘I love you,’ and would be loved faine” (line 9). In contrast, the use of alliteration adds a harsh layer to the poem. In the phrase “and bend/ Your force to breake, blowe, burn” (lines 3-4), Donne repeatedly uses the “b” consonant sound. This makes the phrase sound forceful and cacophonous, which reflects the literal meaning of the words. These small details in the craft of the poem add layers of depth to the paradoxes.

On a larger scale, Donne employs figurative language throughout the poem to strengthen its theme. “Batter my heart, three-person’d God” is divided into four sections. During the first four lines, the speaker uses implied metaphorical language to demand that God makes him new. His freedom is dependent on the actions of God. “Knocke, breathe, shine, and seeke to mend” (line 2) is a possible reference to Christ’s gentle approach and open invitation of salvation (Rev. 3.20). The fourth line is parallel but more intense and vivid: “Breake, blowe, burn, and make me new” (line 4). Since his sinful nature is so stubborn, the speaker requires God to act more powerfully (Heb. 2.14). According to Donne’s interpretation of the Bible, the triune God must knock/break the bonds of sin, breath/blow life, shine/burn him like gold, and seek to mend/make him new.

Initially, it appears as if the speaker has an unhealthy view of his relationship with God. Asking God to use his force to break and mend sounds contradictory and even violent. However, the speaker views sin and salvation as one might view a fracture and healing. Sometimes a bone is so badly broken that the doctor must break it again to properly mend it. Although the patient might be afraid, he can trust the doctor’s judgment. Similarly, the speaker asks God to metaphorically break his crippling sinful nature so that he can “rise and stand” (line 3). These conflicting aspects of God’s nature ultimately make sense to Donne.
Donne uses even more similes and metaphors to say that he cannot save himself from his sin. The next four lines is a simile about an overthrown town to reflect the speaker’s hopelessness. He belongs to God, but he is controlled by the devil and is too weak to fight back on his own (lines 5-8). Donne uses another metaphor about betrothal and divorce to reflect the strong relationship the speaker has with the devil. The speaker cries out for God to divorce him from the devil again (lines 9-12).

“Batter my heart, three-person’d God” expands upon two metaphors found in an earlier poem from the Holy Sonnets. The theme of “Sonnet II: As due by many titles I resigne” is the speaker’s unworthiness of God’s rescue. During the first half of the poem, the speaker describes his identity as a follower of Christ. At the turn of the sonnet, he suddenly asks, “Why doth the devill then usurpe on mee?/ Why doth he steale, nay ravish that’s thy right” (Sonnet II, lines 9-10). He would be hopeless if it was not for the fact that God “rise[s] and for [his] own worke fight” (line 11). Although it does not directly answer these questions, “Batter my heart, three-person’d God” interacts with images in Sonnet II. Now, however, the speaker understands what the devil is doing and wants God to intervene. He no longer feels unworthy, and his word choice reveals his growing desperation.

Although elements of the entire poem reflect the theme, the poem begins and ends with explicitly stated paradoxes. Donne intentionally chose the phrase “three-person’d God” (line 1) because it is an oxymoron. The doctrine of the Trinity says that God is one being that contains three unique persons. Not only does that sound impossible, but the concept also appears to defy the Old Testament’s claim that God is one. To this day, some religious scholars disagree on the validity of this doctrine since there is no explicit definition of the trinity in the Bible. Since God has many titles in the Bible, Donne could have chosen to address him by a name that is more
consistent with the literal meaning of words “batter” (line 1), “knocke” (line 2), “breake” (line 4), and “imprison” (line 12). For example, “Almighty God” would have fit the iambic pentameter structure of the poem and the violent overtones. However, Donne specifically chooses “three-person’d God” because the theme of the poem is about the many paradoxes in the Christian faith. This suggests that the figurative meanings of the words and phrases are more important than their denotations.

As is typical of sonnets, the closing couplet reiterates the theme: “Except you’ enthrall mee, never shall be free,/ Nor ever chaste, except you ravish mee” (lines 13-14). This means that the only way to be free is by submitting to God, and the only way to be innocent is through God’s act of love. This appears to be contradictory until read in light of the Bible. The greatest commandments are to love God and others (Matt. 22.35-40). John writes that perfect love is God’s act of sending Christ to die as a payment of mankind’s sins (1 John 3.16). Although there are many aspects of the Christian life that seem contradictory, such as becoming free by submitting to God, the speaker of “Batter my heart, three-person’d God” comes to believe that the solution is sacrificial love.

“Batter my heart, three-person’d God” captures the tension between mercy and judgement. God could have simply let the speaker flounder and “labour to admit [him], but Oh, to no end” (line 6). However, the speaker trusts that God will act because he has already helped in the past. He is confident the triune God will use his power to “untie or breake that knot againe” (line 11) and free the speaker from sin. Through diction, sound devices and form, figurative language, and explicit paradoxes, Donne emphasizes the theme that there are many conflicting statements in the Bible about the Christian life.
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