

ENGL 125: Major English Poets
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By submitting this essay, I attest that it is my own work, completed in accordance with University regulations. —Eve Houghton

“A Pattern of Your Love”: Sainthood as Erotic Example in “The Canonization” and “The Relic”

by Eve Houghton

The conceit of erotic sainthood in “The Canonization” and “The Relic” invites two opposing considerations of Donne’s aims in melding sacred and profane language. As Cleanth Brooks suggests in an essay on Donne’s use of paradox, the frank eroticism of metaphor in “The Canonization” may lead us to suspect that Donne does not take sainthood seriously; alternately, the irreverence of the erotic sainthood conceit may cause us to detect a certain flippancy in Donne’s attitudes towards love and sex.¹ And yet the fusion of religious and romantic imagery, language, and tropes is neither merely a cheap display of bawdy wit nor a straightforward subversion of religious conventions. In both poems, the conceit of erotic sainthood represents a serious attempt to articulate a hierarchy of values in which romantic love and sexual pleasure can be consecrated as holy acts, appropriating and reclaiming the religious discourses which have previously excluded them. This new conception of lover-saints is predicated upon the commingling of formerly disparate categories: the religious and the erotic, as well as the public and the private. In “The Canonization” and “The Relic,” Donne pushes the boundaries of acceptable religious discourse by conceptualizing a private erotic relationship as a public exemplar of sainthood. More than a bond between two people, the relationship between the canonized lovers becomes an example and pattern for others to follow: “Countries, towns, courts: beg from above / a pattern of your love” (44-45). Even as the poems absorb the language

¹ Brooks, Cleanth. “The Language of Paradox.” *The Norton Anthology of Poetry*. 5th ed. New York City: W. W. Norton & Company, 2005. Print.

and iconography of Catholicism—relics, hermitages, bishops—the conceit of erotic sainthood remains grounded in a Protestant notion of “sainthood” in which saints function primarily as models and examples of virtuous people. And yet the lovers who “prove / Mysterious by this love” (26-27) cannot ever offer a fully intelligible “pattern” for others to emulate, for the miracle of their love is divinely unknowable. Thus Donne demands that his interlocutors accept his conceit of erotic sainthood as the “miracle-mystery” which entitles the lovers to veneration as saints, because the poems themselves cannot fulfill their pedagogical role in naming and articulating the miracles the lovers have wrought.

Donne’s conception of the sainthood of lovers may reflect a need to refashion traditional Catholic ideas of sainthood in response to the political and religious demands of Anglicanism. In “The Relic” he positions the conceit within a hypothetical universe dominated by superstition and idolatry: “a time, or land, / Where mis-devotion doth command” (12-13). It is notable that Donne situates his mirror-world within a separate temporal space; the “time...where mis-devotion doth command” is thus potentially legible as pre-Reformation England, or a mis-devoted England of the future. And yet the conditional formulation of “If this should fall” (12) invites further questions: if the device should fall in a time or place where mis-devotion does *not* command, are the lovers no longer relics? By crafting a conceit which can only function in this hypothetical superstitious realm, Donne privileges mis-devotion as, paradoxically, the only “correct” belief system capable of sustaining his poetic conceit. His creation of a self-contained parallel universe of mis-devotion crafts a recognizable version of England where the Reformation has not (yet?) come to pass or been reversed, thereby highlighting the continuities between Donne’s Protestant England and the mysticism, religious hagiographies, and folk beliefs of the recent Catholic past. As Gary Waller describes, “the remaining traces of the medieval

Catholic world of magical correspondences, providential history, and...the intervention of saints, does not die, but is fragmented, reassembled, and often paradoxically reenchanting.”² When sainthood has lost its traditional powers in England, the discourse of erotic sainthood must reappropriate the superstitious trappings of the old world, even to articulate uniquely Protestant ideas of canonization.

Just as the lovers in “The Relic” rely upon the imagined religious and political authority of “the bishop, and the king” (15) to enact the central conceit of the poem, “The Canonization” commandeers Catholic liturgical language as the structural framework in which the lovers express their mutual devotion. John A. Clair goes so far as to argue for a reading of the latter as a precise inscription of the canonization procedure of the Roman Catholic Church, proceeding “from proof of personal sanctity, to proof of heroic virtue, proof of miracles, examination of the burial place and the saint’s writings, and finally to the declaration of Sainthood and the veneration of the Saint.”³ In Donne’s conceit of erotic sainthood, it is the last of these proceedings which seems to diverge most sharply from Catholic liturgical practices. But what is the Protestant idea of sainthood? John Foxe, in his Protestant history and martyrology the *Book of Martyrs*, describes “a light in God's house, set upon a candlestick for all good men to imitate and follow.”⁴ The OED defines a saint as

One of those persons who are formally recognized by the [Catholic] Church as having by their exceptional holiness of life attained an exalted station in heaven, and as being entitled in an eminent degree to the veneration of the faithful; a canonized person. In Pre-

² Waller, Gary. Rev. of *Patrons and Patron Saints in Early Modern English Literature*, by Alison A Chapman. Routledge Studies in Renaissance Literature and Culture 21. New York: Routledge, 2013

³ Clair, John. "John Donne's "The Canonization"." *PMLA*. 80.3 (1965): 300-302. Web. 4 Dec. 2013.

⁴ Forbush, William Byron , ed. "Persecutions in England During the Reign of Queen Mary." *Foxe's Book of Martyrs*. Christian Classics Ethereal Library. Web. 4 Dec 2013.

Reformation use, the term implies that the persons so designated may be lawfully addressed in prayer for their intercession with God, and that miracles have been wrought through their aid after death (*OED* 2a).

As a former Catholic, Donne was no doubt acquainted with the pre-Reformation notion of the intercessory power of saints. And yet the lovers in “The Canonization” are apostrophized not as saintly arbitrators, but instead as paradigms of romantic partnership, the patron saints of love. They are addressed in prayer not to intercede with God, but to “approve” (35) and “invoke” (37) their example, and they are venerated as saints because they exemplify mutual devotion and self-sufficiency: “You, whom reverend love / Made one another’s hermitage” (37-38). Donne may be accused of facetiousness here, for the lovers are evidently not solitary anchorites. And yet the discontinuity seems to represent a more radical reevaluation of the ideals governing the canonization process, questioning a system of values which privileges isolation over unity, abstinence over consummation. Sexual gratification is equated with religious asceticism not in a mere display of ribald wit, but as a deliberate destabilization of the traditional criteria of sainthood. Donne makes a similarly unorthodox appeal to authority in Holy Sonnet 9, when he attributes his understanding of religious truth to secular, erotic, and even heretical sources: “as in mine idolatry / I said to all my profane mistresses” (7-8). In this sense, private erotic discourse becomes a public, shared currency of religious knowledge, with the same legitimacy as more traditional sources of religious authority.

Looking back to John Clair’s assertion that the central metaphor of “The Canonization” is grounded in the canonization *processus* of the Roman Catholic Church, it may be said that Donne appropriates this liturgical language while amending its parameters. The category of evaluation which Clair calls “proof of miracles” is further modified by Donne so as to include

the divinely “mysterious” idea of love described in the final stanza of “The Relic” and the third stanza of “The Canonization.” The lover-saints “prove / Mysterious by this love” (26-27), and such a mystery forms the crux of the poems’ theological meditation. If the word “mystery” refers to “a doctrine of faith involving difficulties which human reason is incapable of solving” (*OED* 2a), the love portrayed in the poems becomes a miracle of divine revelation. Indeed, the terms “mystery” and “miracle” were often used interchangeably in 17th century English (*OED* 9). Donne’s “proof of miracles” imagines the lovers as *sui generis*, achieving unparalleled self-sufficiency by finding the world in one another :

You, to whom love was peace, that now is rage;

Who did the whole world's soul contract, and drove

Into the glasses of your eyes;

So made such mirrors, and such spies,

That they did all to you epitomize— (39-43)

The lovers perceive the “whole world’s soul...[in] the glasses of your eyes,” even as they create “mirrors” of each other and thus must see their own image reflected back to them as well. In this sense, their mutual gaze subsumes both the world and individual identity; they are contained within each other and reflected in each other’s eyes, exemplifying the perfect unity of “we two being one” (24). Their relationship will miraculously outlast their physical union: they “die and rise the same” (26) at the Day of Judgment, just as the lovers in “The Relic” “make their souls, at the last busy day, / Meet at this grave, and make a little stay” (10-11). Their achievements are singular and unprecedented; for other lovers, love is now “rage,” reflecting the discord and uncertainty of the world, but for them it is “peace.” By meditating upon the mystery of the

lovers, the poem's interlocutors in the "countries," "towns," and "courts" may hope to achieve a similar miraculous revelation of a love which defies human understanding. The divine inexplicability of their love is the miracle-mystery of "The Relic and "The Canonization" which entitles the lovers to veneration as saints, but the reverence owed them is phrased in the language of pedagogy and example, not of intercession: "Countries, towns, courts: beg from above / a pattern of your love" (44-45). The word "pattern" is glossed as "an example or model to be imitated" (*OED* 2a), a definition which accords neatly with Foxe's "light in God's house...for all good men to imitate and follow." Having achieved sainthood, the lovers in "The Canonization" and "The Relic" serve as a "pattern" for others to imitate.

Similarly, the revelation of Redcrosse Knight's identity as England's "sign of victoree" in Book X, Canto I of *The Faerie Queene* renders him not only a sign of sainthood, but an "ensample" and model of virtuous behavior for his countrymen to emulate. Spenser's conception of nationalist sainthood matches the non-intercessory powers of Donne's lover-saints; like Saint George, they can only offer models of holiness, not help or aid. As Alison Chapman writes:

While the idea of [Redcrosse's] saintliness is a compliment to him, it does not open up supernatural avenues of assistance either for those who encounter the "saint" directly (in this case, the adoring populace) or for those who read his legend (readers of *The Faerie Queene*). Redcrosse/St. George may become a patron of England in the sense of serving as a symbol or figurehead, but...he will not be a patron in the sense of offering substantive aid to the nation in times of need.⁵

It seems fair to argue, as Chapman does here, that the legend of St. George in Book I of *The Faerie Queene* does not "open up supernatural avenues of assistance" to its readers. And yet the

⁵ Chapman, Alison A. *Patrons and Patron Saints in Early Modern English Literature*. New York: Routledge, 2012. 31. Print.

pedagogical import of Redcrosse's quest lies not in his portended spiritual destination, but in his quest to correctly construe his role in the nationalistic allegory as "Saint George of merry England" and thus achieve victory and salvation; in this sense, the act of reading is itself an avenue of assistance. Donne's pedagogical agenda is not so explicitly nationalistic (or sycophantic), but he also seems to conceptualize poetry as a teaching tool. In "The Relic," the "device" (9) which brings the lovers together upon the Day of Judgment is perhaps not merely the relic, but the conceit of canonization and relic-creation itself. The didactic responsibility is assigned not to the lovers, but to "this paper":

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 we harmless lovers wrought (19-22).

Donne prefaces his proof of miracles with the qualifying statement "And since at such time miracles are sought," distancing the inhabitants of "that age" from his present interlocutors. And yet the teachings of "this paper" exist in both temporal spaces; the "miracles we harmless lovers wrought" are relayed via the poem in mis-devoted and properly devoted lands alike. A similar temporal ambiguity occurs in "The Canonization," when the lovers find peace in love "that now is rage." The use of the word "now" suggests that the lovers exist in a poetic universe not tied to any particular historical moment, a time situated nebulously before or after the present transmutation of love to rage. But when the lovers are apostrophized as "you," the temporal distinctions are blurred. Does Donne address his apostrophe to the lovers, or his readers? If it is the latter, then it is we for whom love is peace, and the "now" of the line is not our own. Both

poems suggest that the mis-devoted or properly devoted status of the reader's "now" is flexible and indefinite. This ability to identify with mis-devoted ideologies is woven into the rhetorical strategies of the poetry: the pedagogical efficacy of "The Relic" demands that Donne's readers imaginatively inhabit a superstitious land which supports belief in saints and relics, in order for the conceit of erotic sainthood to function.

In "The Canonization," the persuasive power of poetry is such that it can transmute transgressive language into the rhetoric of holiness, sinners into saints: "And if unfit for tomb or hearse / Our legend be, it will be fit for verse" (29-30). A stanza which begins with an admission that the conceit of erotic sainthood falls outside the normal boundaries of religious discourse ends with the triumphant universalizing statement that "all shall approve / Us canonized for love" (35-36). But if Donne's poetry is capable of canonizing lovers and transforming bones into relics, language itself is not the divinely mysterious idea of love. Poetry is supposedly inadequate to the task at hand, for "All measure, and all language, I should pass, / Should I tell what a miracle she was" (32-33). The inhabitants of the "countries, towns, and courts" may revere the lovers and beg for "a pattern of your love," but they cannot understand or recreate it, for to comprehend the divine mystery of the lover-saints is a miracle which passes all bounds of human language and recognition. But while "this paper" can provide only a "pattern" or "relic" of the example left behind by the lovers, such a pattern or relic of their love *is* the mystery-miracle. The Middle English Dictionary defines "miracle" as "a relic from a legendary miracle or remarkable phenomenon" (*MED* 3), a circular definition which depicts the canonization and relic-hood of the lovers as miraculous in of itself. In this sense, the process of reading is the process of belief, and meditation upon the miracle-mystery of a private erotic relationship creates a shared, public discourse of sainthood through which readers can approach the divine.