

What is interesting about the differences and similarities between Donne's secular and divine poetry?

One of the most interesting and surprising features of Donne's secular and divine poems is that there are so many similarities between them. A first glance would suggest the contrary. They are placed at opposite ends of most selected poems editions, a polarity reinforced by chronology: many of the *Songs and Sonnets* (though not all) were written in Donne's youth. Most of the divine poems (although again there are notable exceptions) were written towards the end of his life. The secular poems were addressed to women, the divine, obviously, to God. One might imagine therefore that the *Songs and Sonnets* would be personal and individual and the divine public and general. Yet the latter are surprisingly intimate. Both are addressed to loved ones and to Donne, it appears, his relationship with God is as powerful, confusing and frustrating as his relationship with women.

We are shown a full range of emotion within Donne's secular poetry: from the lust of *The Flea* through to the poignant tender love of the song *Sweetest Love I do not go*. Yet it appears that his relationship with God is equally subject to his conflicting moods. In *Holy Sonnet XIV* he is desperate and frustrated (*I, like a usurper town, to another due/ Labour to admit you, but oh, to no end*), in *Hymn to God the Father* he is humble and imploring (*Wilt thou forgive that sin which I have won/ Others to sin?*) in *Holy Sonnet I* he is fearful and dependent (*What if this present is the world's last night?*). Donne does not seek to hide his struggles with his faith, instead he records his conflicting emotions with raw honesty. Thus the spontaneity and theatre of his secular poetry - *A Lecture Upon a Shadow* for example where Donne addresses his mistress on their morning walk (*Stand still and I will read to thee/ A lecture, love, in Love's philosophy*) - is very much a feature of his divine poetry. Who cannot imagine the fearful Donne of *Holy Sonnet 1* who "Dare not move [his] dim eyes any way." In both these quotations the straightforward language and frequent monosyllables make the lines, and thus the situation described, accessible to the reader. The frequent imperatives of the secular poetry where Donne commands his mistress's attention (*Mark but this flea and mark in this*) are also, interestingly, present in the divine. In *Holy Sonnet XIV* Donne commands God to *Break, blow, burn* him to destroy his sins; the plosive alliteration and stark monosyllables reinforcing his urgency and desperation. The line appears as arrogant as those we find in the *Songs and Sonnets*, yet the meaning of the poem - his desire for God to remould him into a humbler, purer human being - reveals an inner desperation that belies his confidence.

Perhaps the most surprising difference between the secular and divine poems is in Donne's use of imagery. In the *Songs and Sonnets*, where one might expect secular, even sexual imagery, we discover a surprising amount of religiosity. In *The Flea* he writes of his mistress's *sacrilege* in killing the trinity of themselves and the flea, represented by their mutual blood combined in the insect. Purists might find this blasphemous; to Donne, seeking to dazzle his girlfriend with clever argument, religious imagery sanctifies a secular act. Interestingly in a divine poem, *Holy sonnet XIV*, there is an absence of Christian reference. It is here that we find the sexual image we might have expected in *The Flea*, in the last line *Nor ever chaste except you ravish me*. For Donne, his urgent need for God physically to destroy his sin and re-create him, can only be expressed in the most shocking sexual image of rape. Again purists might take exception to this; I find it a refreshing indication of the rawness and reality of Donne's faith.

Clearly there are fundamental differences in the two categories of poems. Donne's women are fickle and fallible, his God is constant and sinless. Yet in seeking to examine and improve his relationship with each he uses a common store of techniques: a love of argument, variety of tone, a tendency to command (albeit sometimes out of despair), a clear sense of theatre and spontaneity and an unlikely but convincing use of imagery. Ultimately it is the surprising similarities between secular and divine poetry that make Donne's work so arresting.