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21L.004 Reading Poetry
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21L.004: Reading Poetry

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Murder me so I may Live: Donne's Paradox of Redemption

John Donne's "Holy Sonnet 14" is concerned with supplication, action, and violence. The speaker begs God to perform seemingly brutal actions against him, pleading with God to "batter [his] heart" (1), to "break, blow, [and] burn" (4) him, to "imprison" him (12), and to "ravish" him (14). Because the poem is in Petrarchan form, the octet poses the speaker's powerlessness in coming back to God from his 'marriage' with the "enemy" (11) and the sestet carries the reader to the speaker's vision of how he will be able to "break that knot" (11) with the "enemy" and experience God in His entirety. As we are carried through this sestet, the speaker asks God to "divorce" (11) him from this "enemy," (10) – clearly temptation or sin – and to "imprison" him (12). In the last couplet, which serves as the poem's main focal point, Donne uses sexual and war-like imagery and parallel structure to establish this vision with a paradox; the speaker argues that he "never shall be free" unless God "enthralls" him (13) and that he will never be "chaste" unless God "ravish[es]" him (14). Essentially, God must reduce the speaker to nothing through seemingly un-Christian actions so that he can be "made new" (4) and pure, as this reduction will lead the speaker to be reborn again with a new purpose.

The form and structure of the poem largely shapes this vision of rebirth and influences the meaning of the work. The poem has no clear recurring metric structure in the octet, and is characterized by many caesuras, like in line four, "Your force, to break, blow, burn, and make

me knew” (4). Donne’s constant use of commas in this line breaks up the line and fragments it, which characterizes the octet as a whole. However, there is a shift at the beginning of the sestet, keyed by the word “yet” (9), as the speaker confesses his love for God. After this turning point, the poem becomes more and more metrically structured and uses increasingly fluent syntax until we reach the last couplet, with both lines composed in iambic pentameter, finally giving the poem a structural pattern. The entire couplet has only two pauses, greatly contrasting with the octet, which develops a sense of fluency. This increasing structure alludes to the development of the speaker’s vision, as he strives for redemption.

This rebirth is contingent on the speaker being completely engulfed and “captived” (8) by God, which is established in the parallel structure of the last couplet. The first line reads “Except You enthrall me, never shall be free” (13) with God’s action first and the consequence for the speaker coming second. This pattern shifts in the second line, “Nor ever chaste, except you ravish me” (14), as we are first introduced to the ramifications for the speaker and then we are given God’s action. This disparity engenders a significant progression that alludes to the speaker’s vision. With a pattern of “God, speaker, speaker, God,” God’s actions clearly surround the speaker, hinting that this rebirth centers on the speaker being “imprisoned” (12) and completely taken over by God’s presence.

This ‘takeover’ in the climactic last two lines is explicitly characterized through the violent war-like and sexual imagery in the couplet that seems to repeat itself throughout the entire poem, which sets the stage for the speaker’s seemingly unusual vision of redemption by showing the extent he would go to if it would bring him closer to God and allow him to experience God in His entirety, even if that meant enslavement. The first line of the couplet is

characterized by this war-like imagery, as the speaker argues that unless God “enthalls” him, he “never shall be free.” Imprisonment imagery arises many times throughout the poem, as early as the first line. The speaker begs with God to “batter his heart,” (1) which creates the image of soldiers with a battering ram trying to break down gates. Essentially, from the onset of the poem, the speaker wants God to “break down the walls” that shield his heart so that his true emotions and passions can “breathe” and shine” (2) and he can be “made new” (4). This image of a battering ram is further characterized with the violence at the conclusion of the fourth line, with “force,” break,” “blow,” and “burn” (4) painting a very brutal image while carrying the reader to the speaker’s new metaphor in line five. Now, the speaker elects to use a new agent, as he likens himself to a “usurped town.” (5) The speaker argues that his “Reason” (7) is “captived,” (8) and pleads for God to “takeover” and “o’erthrow” (3) this “town” so that he may be true to God again. This imagery prepares the reader for the speaker’s vision, as these violent images clearly suggest that God must take drastic measures – “break” his heart”, “overthrow” his “town,” and even enslave him – so that the speaker may reach redemption and explore all that God has to offer.

This is further characterized through the sexual imagery throughout the poem as well, as the author uses these sexual images to set the tone for the extremity of the last couplet, reaching a major climax when the speaker essentially asks God to rape him so that he may be “chaste.” However, this rape is implicit in much of the earlier imagery, which serves to prepare the reader for just how drastic of a solution the speaker proposes. This is especially evident in line three, where the author uses “That I may rise and stand” to signify an erection. He carries this image throughout the line, as he begs with God to “o’erthrow” and “blow” (4)

him, clearly referring to a sexual act. Interestingly, the author enjambs lines three and four, so that although the author actually asks God to “bend [His] force,” we are given an image of the speaker bent over in front of God, due to the line break. This sexual imagery is once again referred to when the speaker compares himself to a “usurped town.” Here, the speaker argues that he “labors to admit” (6) God, alluding to the pain involved in ‘admitting’ or ‘letting God in’ through sexual intercourse. This sexual imagery reaches its peak when the speaker begs God to outright “ravish” him in the last line. Through this imagery, the author reveals the speaker’s desperate nature in his plea that God must commit radical actions so that he may be pure again.

Through the parallel structure and violent imagery in the last couplet, we are given a mold of what the speaker feels is necessary for his rebirth in God’s grace. The paradox in this last couplet leads us to question the speaker’s actual intentions in terms of his image of rebirth. Whether or not he truly wants God to capture him and rape him, it is quite clear that these actions at least serve as a metaphor for the speaker’s vision of what he needs for redemption. He ultimately realizes that he is ‘married to the wrong person’ in the sense that he hasn’t been leading the lifestyle he knows he should, and feels that going to God is a large step in the direction toward being who he wants to be. He is willing to do whatever it takes, even offer himself up for enslavement or rape, as long as these actions would allow him to be with God. Through actions typically associated with God’s “enemy” (10), the speaker feels that he may be able to “break that knot” (11) that unites him with temptation and sin, the embodiment of this “enemy.” By reducing the speaker to this level, where he has felt the pain and anguish of what union with sin can engender, he feels that he will have the power to

“divorce” (11) the enemy and to be “made new” and pure once again, finding his sought after redemption.

Works Cited

Vendler, Helen. Poems, Poets, Poetry: An Introduction and Anthology. 2nd. New York, New York: Bedford-St. Martin's, 2002.